

PHILOLOGY AS THANATOLOGY:
A STUDY ON ANGELO POLIZIANO'S INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

The present study deals with the Italian and Latin writings of Angelo Poliziano, a poet and scholar active at the court of Lorenzo de' Medici in the second half of the fifteenth century (1454-1494). I shall examine Poliziano's works through the notion of thanatology, literally a "discourse on death," and the way it accounts some of the key aspects of his intellectual biography: poetic production, textual criticism, and philosophical convictions.

To my mother and to the dear memory of my father

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INTRODUCTION

“...e quello strano disturbo del comportamento che costringe a trasformare tutti i sentimenti in parole scritte e che, pur mirando alla vita, riesce sempre con sorprendente precisione a mancare il centro.”*

I.1. Preliminary Matters

In a general review of Poliziano's scholarship, the Italian critic Attilio Bettinzoli has pointed out two of the most pressing issues that the scholar of Poliziano has to face: the need for a comprehensive hermeneutics accounting for the various facets of the Tuscan humanist's literary activity, and the lack of a “systematic mapping of the Politianesque world”--which is a flowery way to voice the need of new or updated critical editions of Poliziano's works.¹ This analysis of the state of the art dates back to 1987 but it is still valid today.

As for the first issue, a somewhat paradoxical key factor of resistance to a general interpretation of Poliziano's oeuvre is its very variety, which has attracted the attention of scholars belonging in the most diverse fields of study: from

* R. Calasso, *Soggiorno in una casa di campagna*, by W. G. Sebald. Bookflap.

¹ “Il problema di fondo che coinvolge inevitabilmente chiunque intenda misurarsi, utilizzando qualsivoglia punto di accesso, con la variegata superficie ricoperta dalle carte del Poliziano resta di fatto ancora il possibile reperimento di un'ideale sutura, o di una coerente linea di sviluppo, che non recida e isoli l'una dall'altra le diverse esperienze in essa confluenti. Ora, se qualche insegnamento generale è possibile trarre dall'insieme degli studi accumulatisi in questi ultimi anni [...] è per l'appunto che un tale disegno di ricomposizione complessiva non può riuscire veramente fattibile sino a che non si sia adeguatamente sdipanata sotto i nostri occhi quella sorta di sistematica descrizione dell'orbe poliziano cui andiamo gradualmente assistendo, e attraverso la quale si vanno dunque concretamente ponendo le basi di un tale venturo edificio” (Bettinzoli 1987, 53 *passim*). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Italian literary studies to the history of classical scholarship, from music to legal studies, from philosophy to the history of medicine. Nonetheless, what has been achieved in depth from by such an extraordinary cross-disciplinary attention and detailed examination, has rendered Poliziano less accessible on the surface. The result is that his intellectual figure has been stretched so much that it is now somehow recognizable only to specialists in each single field. In other words, Poliziano and his accomplishments struggle in finding a substantial place in a general discourse on Renaissance literature. A good piece of evidence of this state of things is the treatment that Poliziano enjoys in the anthologies still in use today in Italian high schools. This handful of influential handbooks, which are for the students their first and most direct means of access to Italian literary history, constitute the place where the national literary canon is shaped and are key to determine the perception that a literary national tradition has of the authors who belong in it.² For what interests us here, these handbooks feature only few excerpts from Poliziano's works, most notably passages from the *Stanze per la giostra* and the *Orfeo* and fragmentary translations of some of his Latin writings. As a result, it should not sound too far fetched to say that from the standpoint of literary history, which is the compass with which, for better or for worse, we orient ourselves in the sea of literature, references to Poliziano are increasingly disappearing.³

² See Luperini 1999.

³ On this side of the Atlantic, this perception is confirmed by the very limited number of papers devoted to Poliziano in the major conferences on the Italian Studies, such as the the North Eastern Modern Language Association, or the American Association for Italian Studies. Only very recently the Renaissance Society of America Convention has hosted panels specifically dedicated to Poliziano.

As for the second problem, the solution ideally rests on the *Progetto Poliziano*, a large research project recently launched by the Centro Dipartimentale di Studi Umanistici in Messina, directed by Vincenzo Fera and aimed at the publication of the critical edition of the whole corpus of Poliziano's works. I said "ideally" because critical editions take a very long time to be carried out and, at times, they are never completed.⁴ Still, some editions by scholars involved in the project have already seen the light: as in the case of Poliziano's *Latini* (Mercuri 2007), the preface to his course on Homer (Megna 2007), the notes to his translation of the *Iliad* (Megna 2009), and a study on a chapter of the first Miscellany (Megna 2012). In more general terms, is it to welcome the initiative of those publishers who have decided to put out editions that, although not critical *stricto sensu*, allow to access works which otherwise should be read in facsimile of early printed editions. For Poliziano in particular, I am thinking to the first volume of the *Letters* (Books 1-4), edited by Shane Butler in 2004 for the series *I Tatti Renaissance Library*, directed by James Hankins for Harvard University Press, with Latin and English text; or to the *Lamia*, edited by Christopher S. Celenza for Brill in 2010, with Latin and English text and four accompanying essays. For the present study I have used all modern editions where available, but for the first Miscellany, Poliziano's philological masterpiece, I had to rely to the *Angeli Politiani Opera omnia*, printed by Aldus Manutius

⁴ See the considerations made in Bausi 2008. For the *Progetto Poliziano* see: http://www.cisu.unime.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=6&Itemid=78. Last access: 16 July 2013. If on the one hand critical editions, due to their unique nature and scope are technically irreplaceable, on the other it must be said that some of the scholars who have largely contributed to this field of study--to limit myself only to the great few such as Eugenio Garin, Ida Maïer, and Mario Martelli--never provided critical editions of Poliziano's works (Mario Martelli's edition of the *Stanze* for the publisher Tallone in 1979 was not a critical one).

(Venice 1498), trustworthy from the standpoint of the text but not paginated, collated with the 1553 Basileana, textually less reliable but paginated.⁵

With regards to the lack to the issue mentioned before, that is the lack of a comprehensive critical approach due to the variety of Poliziano's writings, the theoretical way of access I chose--what I shall later expound upon as the "thanatological discourse"--is apt to retie many of the several strings constituting the different facets of his activity as poet and scholar. As I hope it will become evident in the details of each single chapter, mine is not an attempt to assemble together, by means of the privileges of hindsight, literary objects that were disconnected at their origin. Rather, what I shall be trying to accomplish is to trace and describe that "consistent line of development" Bettinzoli was talking about in the opening passage. But with a caveat: that that "consistency" should not be understood as an attribute of the "line of development" but as an indicator of the presence of a pulsating force underscoring Poliziano's writings. Indeed, as I am reluctant to apply the category of "development" to a work of art, whatever its medium may be, I shall consider that unifying principle--thanatology--not as a vector of a progressive line, but rather as a point from which a series of lines irradiates.⁶

As long as we assume that in scholarly contributions, competing methodologies are empirically discernable, and hence easily recognized and

⁵ A critical text of the first Miscellany is probably the most sought after editorial product by the scholars of Poliziano. The critical edition by H.Katayama (Tokyo, 1982) is a veritable ghost-book that no one seems to have seen. Alan Cottrell is now preparing an edition for the *I Tatti Renaissance Library* and I would like to thank him for having allowed me to look at the work he has done so far.

⁶ I am here following Gombrich 1979.

classified, there are two considerations to make. In writing this dissertation, I adopted a philological-historical oriented approach: by this, I mean that the main goal of my research is to provide a reading of Poliziano's writings according to sources and categories of thought strictly pertaining to the world in which Poliziano operated, i.e. central and northern Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century. Accordingly, the main goal is that of making as fruitful as possible the relationship between texts and context. As a consequence, I shall try to emphasize as much as possible the context of the production and fruition of those sources, and minimize the adoption of analogical or trans-historical hermeneutic practices. Indeed, I would like to stand clear of two of the most treacherous tendencies of some contemporary literary criticism, vividly described by Tzvetan Todorov as "pragmatism" on the one hand and as "nihilistic deconstructionism" on the other: according to the former, the text is capable of saying anything; for the latter, the text can only say nothing.⁷

The second methodological point deals with the selection of the sources and the description of their mutual relations. According to the traditional system of literary approaches, my dissertation would be classified under the label of "thematic study."⁸ Thematic studies have undergone a rather singular destiny, especially with regard to the field of Italian Studies: they have been considered either the lowest level of critical activity--basically an activity of mere compilation--or one of the highest functions of the literary scholar who, by

⁷ Todorov 2005. See also Wellek 1983.

⁸ The bibliography on the subject is vast, hence I shall limit myself to some key works, all provided with rich literature: Pozzi 1984; Daemmrich and Daemmrich 1987; Sollors 1993; Bremond, Landy and Pavel 1995; Segre 1999. See also the introduction to Ceserani, Domenichelli and Fasano 2007.

proceeding with this type of analysis, recognizes some of the recurring, and hence most distinctive, features of a given author.⁹ There is some truth to both of these positions: an analysis that resolves itself into a thematic recognition, “freezes” the inner dynamic of an artifact into the scheme of repetition; by the same token, the thematic investigation provides the reader with elements of unity and continuity of an artifact that consolidate the comprehension of its phenomenology. A good case study to understand this dialectic relation is the reception of the masterpiece of thematic literary criticism: Ernst R. Curtius’ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948).¹⁰ Although it is probably the book that any literary scholar wishes to have written, it has also encountered stern disapproval from those who think that Curtius’ book ultimately is an impressive graveyard of “common places”, of dismembered elements detached from their place of origin and thence annihilated in the grand scheme of continuity.

In my case, I tried to avoid this type of criticism by building a “thanatology,” a discourse on death. Dealing with death as theme offers two exceptional advantages: versatility and denotation: indeed, as it displays a vast semantic field channeled in several sub-thematic articulations (end, loss, destruction, limit, etc.), death is able to attract a myriad of literary objects and allows the construction of a narrative around them. At the same time, death is such a unique human experience that its symbolic potential--negativity--cannot be confused or mistaken with other experiences, providing unity to the scholarly findings but granting their individuality.

⁹ See Pozzi 1984.

¹⁰ Antonelli 1992.

But the novelty of the thanatological approach entails an additional set of considerations that I decided to develop in greater detail in the next chapter, leaving the following pages for the discussion on the literature on Poliziano. Still, before we proceed, I believe it is necessary for a better understanding of this project, which collects material for an intellectual biography, to outline a profile of Poliziano and his context.

I. 2. Angelo Ambrogini from Montepulciano, a.k.a. Poliziano (1454-1494)

The life of Poliziano is captured, metaphorically and iconographically, by the image of the laurel, not only because of his status of poet but also because his entire life was heavily influenced by his intellectual and intimate relationship with Lorenzo (Laurentius) de' Medici.¹¹ Born in Montepulciano near Siena in 1454, after the murder of his father (1464) Poliziano moved to Florence where he was soon admitted to the Medici household as *homericus adulescens*, after having dedicated to Lorenzo a prodigious Latin version of Books II and III of the *Iliad*.¹² He would soon become tutor to some of Lorenzo's children. In 1475, he became Lorenzo's secretary and, thanks to his intercession, in 1477, he obtained the highly remunerative *beneficium* of the rich *prioria* di S.Paolo. He later again stood by Lorenzo's side in the critical aftermath of the Pazzi conspiracy, which inspired the composition of the *Pactianae Coniurationis Commentarium* (1478)

¹¹ There is no modern biography of Poliziano, and scholars still make profit out of Mencken 1736. After the erudite studies by Del Lungo and Picotti quoted above, the only modern attempt in this direction is that of Maier 1966, though it covers only Poliziano's early adulthood, that is, until 1480. For his later years, one might want to look at Godman 1998, 3-133. Much material for a biography can be drawn from Branca 1983. Bigi 1986 remains the most agile profile, while the comprehensive Orvieto 2009 is more a reassessment and critical evaluation of Poliziano's works.

¹² See Levine-Rubinstein, 1983.

and caused the abrupt and inevitable interruption of *Le Stanze per la giostra*, an encomiastic poem dedicated to Giuliano de' Medici, Lorenzo's brother, murdered in the conspiracy.¹³ Of these years is also the *Sylva in scabiem*, a gloomy *poemetto* ("lachrymabile carmen") that is one of the strangest artifacts of Humanist Latinity.

The year 1479 witnessed the lowest point in the rapport between Poliziano and his patron: in May, Clarice Orsini, Lorenzo's wife, threw Poliziano out of the villa in Cafaggiuolo where they were residing together, probably for pedagogical divergences regarding the education of Lorenzo's children, among whom was counted Giovanni, the future pope Leo X. In December of the same year, Poliziano refused to accompany Lorenzo in the difficult diplomatic mission to Naples, and opted instead for a journey throughout Northern Italy, where he met prominent intellectuals who shared his philological interests, such as Filippo Beroaldo the Elder in Bologna, Ermolao Barbaro and Girolamo Donà in Venice. He also stayed in Mantua by Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, to whom he dedicated the *Fabula di Orfeo*, which would become one of the key works of the Renaissance *teatro per musica*.¹⁴

By the summer of 1480 Poliziano was back in Florence. The Pazzi conspiracy and the Medici's' ruthless reaction against it offered Lorenzo the occasion for the ultimate seizing of power: Lorenzo and Poliziano together with other intellectuals of the caliber of Cristoforo Landino, Marsilio Ficino and

¹³ For the *Stanze*, see Chapter 3. The *Commentarium* is the only historical work written by Poliziano and certainly his most political: a pamphlet which was immediately set to print to foster propaganda in favor of the Medici. See the edition by Perosa 1958. For the conspiracy, see Martines 2003 and Najemy 2006 351-360.

¹⁴ See *Orfeo*; Pirrotta 1969.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, would establish an unchallenged command on the two Florentine republics, the political and the literary.¹⁵ Against this background, one should look at Poliziano's appointment as professor of poetics and rhetoric at the University of Florence in 1480, a position that he would hold until 1494, the year of his death. From the moment of his appointment, Poliziano would devote his attention almost exclusively to classical and philosophical texts (especially Aristotle). In the span of less than fifteen years, he would collect an astonishing amount of notes on the most diverse classical authors, following an idea that he himself had fashioned, that of the *grammaticus*, i.e. the philologist.¹⁶

And indeed the largest amount of Poliziano's scholarly and literary output was produced over the fifteen years in which he carried out this massive project. What remains of this production is constituted mainly by four groups of works: the *praelectiones*, the commentaries, the miscellanies, and a collection of letters. The *praelectiones* are the orations that were customarily delivered by a university professor at the beginning of the academic year. There is nothing "customary," however, about Poliziano's prolusions: out of the eight extant prolusions, four are in verse--the so-called *Silvae* (*Manto*, *Rusticus Ambra*, *Nutricia*)--another one, the *Panepistemon*, is a project for an encyclopedia, and finally, the *Lamia*, "the most beautiful Latin prose prolusion of the Renaissance" (E. Garin),¹⁷ is a fable.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Martelli 1980a; Martelli 1995, 7-71. See also Hankins 1994, 26-32.

¹⁶ All these aspects are amply discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ Garin 1994, 351.

¹⁸ We have an excellent edition of the *Silvae* done by Bausi 1996 and an English translation by Fantazzi 2004. Unfortunately, the *Panepistemon* is still to be read in the early printed editions, but I have begun research to provide a commented text of this work myself.

The *Silvae*, inspired by the aesthetic of *docta varietas* (learned variety) and of the *remota lectio* (peregrine assembling), represent the last and most effective examples of that learned Latin poetry that Poliziano had composed alongside his waning vernacular production, which fades in these years.¹⁹ The commentaries and the miscellanies are the by-product of Poliziano's philological activity: in the former, not meant for publication, he amassed the notes he used in class with his students.²⁰ In the latter, to which he hoped to entrust his fame, Poliziano collected a series of essays in which he addressed specific philological and literary issues.²¹ Finally, the *Liber epistolarum*, a collection of letters that Poliziano had written in the last years of his life, was posthumously, but not very craftily, assembled by two of Poliziano's pupils who took care of his literary legacy, Pietro Crinito and Alessandro Sarti. Poliziano died under mysterious circumstances on September 28th, 1494.²²

¹⁹ There are excellent commented Italian edition of Poliziano's vernacular works: see, for the most recent, Carrai 1988a, Puccini 1992, Bausi 2006a. Noteworthy are also the studies and the edition that Daniela Delcorno Branca has done of the "rime" (see Delcorno Branca 1979 and 2009). For the English we have a good modern edition of the *Stanze* by David Quint, but the other vernacular works have not been recently translated (to give just an example, the last English version of the *Orfeo* dates to early twentieth century).

²⁰ To quote but few of them, see *Comm. Silv.*, Fera 1983, Cesarini Martinelli and Ricciardi 1985, Castani Musicò 1990, Lo Monaco 1991, Silvano 2010.

²¹ Of the first Miscellany I said above. As for the second, unfinished, book of the miscellanies, retrieved only in 1963 and now having the place of pride in the library of the Cini Foundation in Venice, we have an edition by Vittore Branca and Manlio Pastore Stocchi, which is considered a masterpiece of modern textual criticism (Florence, 1972).

²² See Branca 1983 322-328; Dionisotti 1985; Stewart 1997. On the flaws introduced by the editors in the *Liber epistolarum*, see Martelli 1995, 205-265.

I.3. Literature Review²³

Any critical assessment of Poliziano's literary activity should depart from the consideration that it could be sorted into a vernacular production and a Latin one.²⁴ This elementary subdivision, which is customary in the case of most humanists at least since Petrarca, with Poliziano assumes specific traits, and entails some consequence in terms of literary historiography. Indeed, it should be pointed out that the vernacular production pertains to Poliziano's years before his appointment as professor at the Florentine *Studio* and that he had given specific directives to his collaborators about not putting into print his vernacular works.²⁵ This split between a vernacular Poliziano and a Latin one became an actual gap in the mid-nineteenth century, as with the formation of the Italian national-state (1860-70), many literary critics were urged to privilege the production in vernacular instead of that in Latin.²⁶

For Francesco De Sanctis, the literary historian that more than any other provided an overarching literary identity the Italian newborn state, Poliziano is basically the poet of the *Stanze* and the *Fabula di Orfeo*.²⁷ De Sanctis' prestige as scholar and his self-portrayal as literary legislator was so influential that it is not surprising that the most important contributions to Poliziano's scholarship in the

²³ The purpose of this section is not of providing an overview of the contributions of Poliziano's scholars--which would be impossible to do here--but rather of illustrating the point that I made above about the "two" Polizianos (the Latin and the vernacular) and about the lack of comprehensive interpretative works. Fundamental bibliographic reviews are: Delcorno Branca 1972; Bettinzoli 1987 and 1993; Bessi 1992. See also the bibliographic references at the end of Orvieto 2009.

²⁴ Poliziano also composed some epigrams in Greek, edited and richly annotated in Pontani 2002.

²⁵ The question of Latin vs Italian vernacular is discussed in Chapter 3.

²⁶ See Celenza 2004, 1-15, with literature.

²⁷ De Sanctis' position is discussed in Chapter 4.

second half of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth are devoted almost exclusively to the vernacular production.²⁸ With few exceptions, this scholarly production--mostly inspired by impressionistic and aesthetic criticism (very fashionable at the time)--fell rapidly into obsolescence. It should be added that the same nationalistic impetus that animated De Sanctis was also present in some scholars of Positivistic persuasion (the so-called *scuola storica*) who occupied themselves in an outstanding activity of archival research and to whom we owe some of the most important collections of documents of direct relevance for our humanist's life, such as Isidoro Del Lungo's *Florentia* and Giovan Battista Picotti's *Ricerche umanistiche*.²⁹

The turning point in Poliziano's scholarship can be dated to 1954, i.e. the fifth-hundredth anniversary of his birth.³⁰ This occasion was celebrated with two major events: an international conference and an exhibition of books and documents pertaining to Poliziano's activity as poet and scholar.³¹ These two events were strictly linked. Indeed, besides some of the papers presented, some of which are still quite useful, the most important contribution that came out from the conference was the realization that time has come to publish reliable editions

²⁸ See Fumagalli 1915; Rho 1923 (very tellingly, the second announced volume of this work, that on Latin poetry, was not published); Sapegno 1938; Momigliano 1946; De Robertis 1953; Valeri 1954.

²⁹ Isidoro Del Lungo is also the editor of *Prose volgari inedite e poesie latine e greche edite e inedite di Angelo Ambrogini Poliziano* (Florence, 1867), on which we still rely for large part of Poliziano's vernacular production and especially for the Latin epigrams and odes. Picotti's studies are still fundamental especially to reconstruct our humanist's early years. Also, in recent times, his contributions on the chronology of the *Fabula di Orfeo*, an intricately issued on which scholars have spilled much ink, have been reassessed. See Chapter 3.

³⁰ "Insomma perché la splendida filologia del Poliziano riapparisse al centro del quadro, ci toccò attendere il quinto centenario della nascita" (Dionisotti 1968, 152).

³¹ I am here referring to *PST* and to *Mostra* (for which see the list of works cited).

of Poliziano's works in Latin, many of which were displayed in the exhibition.³² This invitation was taken up by Alessandro Perosa who, at that time, had just published the first critical edition of the *Sylva in scabiem* (1954) and was preparing an edition of the *Pactianae Coniurationis commentarium* (1958). A few years later, Ida Maier provided fundamental support to this large project, publishing *Les manuscrits d'Ange Politien*, a survey of the manuscripts consulted by, studied by, or belonged to our humanist.³³

For the Latin Poliziano Perosa did even more than what Francesco De Sanctis did for the vernacular one. He collected around him a group of specialized philologists and promoted the modern editions of all of our humanist's Latin writings. Thanks to him and his Florence-based circle we have extremely reliable editions of most of these works, but, as we said above, Poliziano's *oeuvre* is so vast that the task is not over. With the publication of Silvia Rizzo's *Il lessico filologico degli umanisti* (Rome, 1973) we have the first, major attempt not only at reconstructing Poliziano's philological Latin but also at grasping its significance for his production.³⁴

From this glorious season of study until the mid nineties of the last century, we were in an opposite situation compared to the post-De Sanctis one: several key philological achievements accompanied by an exiguous number of interpretative contributions.³⁵ The book-length studies published in this span of

³² Campana, 1957, esp. 198-217.

³³ Maier 1965.

³⁴ A task that Rizzo took over again in an important article, see Rizzo 1996.

³⁵ The great part of the most valuable studies are contained in the proceedings of conferences, see *Il Poliziano latino*. Atti del Seminario di Lecce (28 aprile 1994), ed. Paolo Viti (Galatina, 1994); *Poliziano nel suo tempo*. Atti del VI Convegno Internazionale (Chianciano-Montepulciano, 18-21 Luglio 1994) (Florence, 1996); *Agnolo Poliziano*.

time are merely collections of essays already published in the past. Fortunately for us, their quality surpasses their quantity. Anthony Grafton's first chapter of his *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* is still the most detailed account of Poliziano's activity as philologist in the general field of fifteen-century classical scholarship, and has the merit also of being the first attempt at describing the *Nachleben* of Poliziano's literary legacy--indeed, as of today, there is no comprehensive study on *la fortuna del Poliziano*.³⁶ Of the same year is the publication of Vittore Branca's collected papers, which are still a goldmine of information, and to which we owe essential contributions about the influence exerted on Poliziano by the Venetian and the Northern Italian intellectual circles.³⁷

In 1995, Mario Martelli put to print a collection of some of his papers on Poliziano, sorting out those which tackle specific and contingent issues of the life and works of our humanist (which he groups under the label "storia"), and those that, instead, study and highlight some of Poliziano's recurring features (which he groups under the label "metastoria"); "*Il liber epistolarum* del P." e "*La semantica del P.*" are the two articles that, respectively, better represent the two approaches that I described above and are both two masterpieces of scholarship on Humanism.³⁸ Partially in contrast with the critic Emilio Bigi--who, building on Garin's idea of Poliziano as "intellettuale alessandrino," has developed an

Poeta scrittore filologo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi (Montepulciano, 3-6 novembre 1994), (Florence, 1998); *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*. (Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 4 Novembre 1994- 31 Dicembre 1994) (Florence, 1994).

³⁶ Grafton 1983, which elaborates the material of his important 1977 article.

³⁷ Branca 1983.

³⁸ Martelli 1995.

extremely refined form of criticism of Poliziano's style--³⁹ Martelli has put forward the necessity of seeing Poliziano as an active individual, deeply involved in the cultural policy of the Medici. This integrally historical approach is nowadays followed, among others, by Peter Godman and by Francesco Bausi, who now is probably the leading scholar on Poliziano.⁴⁰

As for the specific topic of death, the scholarship on Poliziano produced very little. Nonetheless, if it is quite easy to come by passages of his writings in which death or the other notions connected to its semantic field is not contemplated or alluded to, critics have only alluded to or sporadically mentioned this topic. In what follows, I shall discuss the few exceptions to this state of things.

The first attempt to develop the topic of death in a comprehensive approach is a 1954 article by Juliana Cotton-Hill, icastically entitled "Death and Politian." Unfortunately, this contribution does not maintain what its title promises, especially because it is not easy to distinguish in it the boundaries between biography and criticism, and those between history and symbolism are quite blurred. Still, despite several imprecisions and some hasty conclusions, this article has the merit to point to the right direction, that is to concentrate on death as privileged key of access to fifteenth century culture: "The symbol of that age is

³⁹ In the articles collected in Bigi 1967. I do not think to say something too far fetched in affirming that, despite the quantitatively limited output of Bigi's scholarship on Poliziano, he is, in my opinion, the critic who more than any other has "felt" and deeply understood our Tuscan humanist.

⁴⁰ See Godman 1993 and 1998. Bausi is the author of a large amount of scholarly contributions on Poliziano and the author of the most recent editions of his poetic corpus, both in Latin and in the vernacular. See the *Silvae* cited above and Bausi 2006a.

death rather than life, that ‘truly avaricious death’ which ‘claims every mortal thing.’” And later: “Death is indeed the symbol of this violent age.”⁴¹

Building on Cotton-Hill’s article, Eugenio Donato’s “Death and History in Poliziano’s ‘Stanze’” (1965) contains valuable interpretive insights on both the *Stanze per la giostra* and the *Orfeo*, especially when he focuses on death not as an accidental motive among many, but as the device that creates meaning in these works. Donato also refers to a study published in the same journal the previous year, Gian-Paolo Biasin’s “Messer Jacopo giù per Arno se ne va....,” centered on Poliziano’s commentary on the Pazzi conspiracy. Some of Biasin’s conclusions are not very original as they were already present in Perosa’s edition of the work, but Biasin’s merit is that of shedding some light on the aspect of the macabre in Poliziano’s writings, a field that still open to investigation. The last contribution here in review is that by Emilie Sérís, *Les étoiles de Némésis* (2002). In a chapter entitled “Carpe diem,” Sérís argues how for Poliziano death represents a key moment in the ethics and the aesthetics of the poetics of memory and analyzes the images of the dead in his “funerary” poems.⁴² That of Sérís’ is a fine analysis of Poliziano’s poetic production, and its only flaw is that she seems to have little or no interest in his prose. Still, hers is the only attempt at a larger, if not comprehensive, thematic analysis done on the topic of death.

⁴¹ Cotton Hill 1954, 96 and 100. The embedded citation is from Lorenzo de Medici’s *Comento* (“E la morte è veramente avara, perché maggiore avarizia non può essere che di colui il quale vuole tutto per sé, come la morte vuole ogni mortal cosa”[de’ Medici 1992, I, 411]).

⁴² “Je propose d’étudier les stratégies rhétoriques mises en oeuvre par Politien pour ressusciter à volonté dans l’esprit d’un proche, accable de chagrin, l’image vivante d’un être chéri et perdu, ou au contraire pour la chasser. Je me demanderai en suite si les image des défunts présentent chez Politien des caractéristiques esthétiques particulières susceptible d’être repérées dans certaines images peintes de la même période” (Sérís 2002, 264-265).

Finally, I would like to spend a few words on two books that have not treated death as such but have elaborated on the negative dimension of Poliziano's *Weltanschauung*. The first is Claudio Mutini's *Interpretazione del Poliziano* (1972), a formidable mixture of critical intelligence and monumental obscurity. The second is Paul Colilli's *Poliziano's Science of Tropes* (1989), an analysis conducted in the light of the theoretical speculation of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. As brilliant and stimulating as it is, Colilli's volume was of little use for my own research, which is done according almost exclusively to early-modern categories of thought.

I.4. Goals of the Present Study

My dissertation has three main goals. The first is to provide material to present a new portrait of Poliziano, where the distinctions between the poet and the scholar could finally merge into a full-round intellectual figure. This is why I especially focused my analysis on the interrelations between literature and philology, and between this and philosophy.

Second, I aim at emphasizing those aspects of Poliziano's production that have been usually neglected or overlooked by scholarship, which, with different degrees of self-awareness, made him the champion of a triumphal idea of Renaissance Humanism that never existed. In my reading, the intrinsic negative dimension imbued in Poliziano's works will be studied not as a mere expression of his taste, but as a way to look at the world. To track down this negative dimension, to furnish a map of its ramifications, and finally to provide a

persuasive account of it, is one of the main purposes of this study, and, at the same time, constitutes the center around which it revolves.

The third goal, probably the most ambitious, is connected to the second and it is more likely to be one of its articulations. By emphasizing the idea of limit intrinsic to “thanatology” and the impact this had on Poliziano’s philosophical reflections, I would like to posit Poliziano in that line of skeptical thought that is usually connected to sixteenth century mentality and finds in Montaigne that marvelous balance of complexity and elegance. This would be my modest contribution to Eugenio Garin’s teaching that in the Italian Humanism not only philosophy but also literature could offer answers to the question of truth.

I.5. Structure of the Dissertation

Besides this introductory section, the present dissertation is made of four chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, I shall expound upon the notion of “thanatology,” a discourse on death that has several articulations impacting specifically on Poliziano’s reflections on his activity as philologist. These will be illustrated in the second part of the first chapter but they are also ideally connected to the exposition contained on Chapter 4 (see below).

The second chapter is an overview of Poliziano’s life and career as philologist. There I shall argue that our Tuscan humanist’s ideas on the use Latin and the vernacular shaped, and were mutually influenced by, Lorenzo de’ Medici’s classicism. In the context of a newly conceived “municipal philology,” I shall also contend that Politian used his position in the University of Florence for the creation of a Latinate republic of letters, ahead of Cinquecento academies.

An analysis of death as theme, and especially death as event in some of Poliziano poetry, namely the *Epicedion in Albieram*, the *Stanze per la giostra*, and the *Orfeo* will be dealt with in Chapter 3. There I shall argue that, contrarily to the typical Humanistic attitude, for Poliziano poetry is not there to dispel death through beauty but that beauty is rather enhanced by death itself.

The last chapter deals with Poliziano's philosophical tenets and on how he progressively rejected ideals of philosophy that he considered incompatible with the weak anthropology that he had been conceiving during the last years of his life. This rejection entailed a form of skepticism and the ensuing embracing of philology as the only space of epistemological viability.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Thanatologia

On 16 January 1632, Rembrandt presented a large painting to the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons: *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. It showed a group of Dutch physicians gathered around a corpse. The body presumably belonged to Adriaan Adriaanszoon, a criminal hanged on that same day. A young Thomas Browne, the future author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, is likely to have attended that class:

the anatomy lessons given every year in the depth of winter by Dr Nicolaas Tulp were not only of the greatest interest to a student of medicine [like Thomas Browne] but constituted in addition a significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself as emerging from the darkness into the light. The spectacle, presented before a paying public drawn from the upper classes, was no doubt a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences; but it also represented (though this surely would have been refuted) the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment. That the anatomy lesson in Amsterdam was about more than a thorough knowledge of the inner organs of the human body is suggested by Rembrandt's representation of the ceremonial nature of the dissection--the surgeons are in their finest attire, and Dr Tulp is wearing a hat on his head--as well as by the fact that afterwards there was a formal, and in a sense symbolic, banquet.⁴³

This greenish, gleamy, and stiff cadaver, set against the majestic black of the vulture-like surgeons' robes, would arguably become the most common picture of a thanatological setting.

Apparently, the word "thanatology" first appeared in the title of a book of a certain Wilhelm Budaeus, a German physician intrigued by the mysteries of longevity: *Thanatologia, comprehendens personas illustres et doctas, quae*

⁴³ Sebald 1999, 18.

proxime elapsis 100. annis in vita esse desierunt (1603).⁴⁴ A number of treatises with similar titles followed, and in 1842 the term entered the *OED*, when Robley Dunglison, “the father of American physiology,” published the third edition of his *Medical Lexicon*: “‘Thanatology’, a description, or the doctrine, of death.” Today thanatology commonly refers to “the scientific study of death, its causes and phenomena. Also (orig. *U.S.*), the study of the effects of approaching death and of the needs of the terminally ill and their families.”⁴⁵

In more recent years, the meaning of thanatology has progressively extended to partially migrate to fields other than the medical or the biological. To be sure, thanatology never became a mainstream notion but it is noteworthy that as early as 1979, the British historian Lawrence Stone could observe its departure from its point of origin: “there is now a special branch of learning called ‘Thanatology’, and historians of death, like Philippe Ariès or Michel Vovelle, have suddenly appeared on the scene.” In the same article, Stone recognized how historians would normally refrain from treating death as subject of scholarly investigation:

for nearly half a century we have been living in a society which thinks and speaks and writes more and more explicitly about sex, but thinks and speaks and writes less and less explicitly about death. We have lived through a period of “the pornography of death,” when it has been a taboo subject for polite conversation. In the last decade this taboo has collapsed, and historians, like the rest of us, have rushed in to fill the vacuum.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ There seems to be no relation between him and the French polymath Guillaume Budé, see McNeil 1975, 12 n. 41.

⁴⁵ See the entry “thanatology” in *OED* online. Last access 18 June 2013.

⁴⁶ Stone 1977. By that time Ariès had indeed published one of the most influential, though much criticized, works on the subject, *L'homme devant à la mort* (Paris 1977), while Vovelle had put out two monographs, respectively *Vision de la mort et de l'au-delà en Provence du XVe au XIXe siècle d'après les autels des âmes du purgatoire* (co-authored with Gaby Vovelle) (1970) and *Mourir autrefois* (1974). Stone

By using the expression “pornography of death,” Stone was mentioning to the title of a seminal article by Geoffrey Gorer, that already in 1955 advocated for the breaking of that taboo (for “no censorship has ever been so effective”), and that can be considered as the ground-breaking move of a new conception of thanatology that does not coincide with the medical and biological ones.⁴⁷

In Italy, Dr Francesco Campione, a physician and psychologist, has particularly stressed on the redefinition of thanatology and, as co-founder and president of the I.A.T.S. (International Association of Thanatology and Suicidology), has expressed his theoretical positions in the “Manifesto of Thanatology.” For being a manifesto, it is at times overly discursive, and, like any collection of programmatic statements, it also suffers from ambitious inclusiveness: “Thanatology cannot be an enclosed discipline, a pre-defined field of human knowledge,” it is “ubiquitous and transversal with regard to any field of knowledge,” and “accompanies man’s experience throughout all the ages, for it has always existed as part of any intellectual discipline and of any field of human activity” (items nos. 3-4-5).⁴⁸

Certainly, it would be naïve to assume that we need a manifesto in order to explore the theme of death in literature, also because this is not what I am doing here. The point that I would like to illustrate deals instead with the relationship between the literary and the thanatological discourses. Literature can indeed

was writing during the golden decade of thanatology, as most of the works helping the redefinition of this discipline were published in the 1970s, see, among others, Ziegler 1973; Thomas 1975, all with literature.

⁴⁷ Gorer 1955, 53.

⁴⁸ The complete text here: http://www.progettorivivere.it/iats_manifesto.asp (in Italian only). Last access 3 Aug 2013. See also Campione 2005.

offer essential contributions to the description of man's experience of death: as a cultural and historical by-product, it provides an array of diverse experiences that can be accounted for even if conflicting, since literature, differently from sciences, does not solve problems but thrives on contradiction; moreover, as an imaginative and fictional artifact, literature allows the creation of alternative worlds that can be indifferent to the laws of physics and biology, to the extent that literature is able, among other things, to represent the unspeakable of the after-life (one does not need to mention Dante or Milton here). Finally, with specific reference to the experience of death, literature grants fictional possibilities against the end of possibilities which is death itself.

As for the reverse point of view, that is the perspectives that thanatological discourse opens to literature, it can hardly be overestimated. The discourse of and on death is a key feature in practically all literary traditions and is constantly enriched by the parallel intellectual elaborations made in the fields of religion or philosophy. The more or less tentative answers to the questions that death as event poses cover an impressive span of hypotheses, that have often been incorporated and re-articulated in the domain of literature. It is especially in literary discourse that the semantic field of death and its cognates have been immensely enlarged, providing a remarkable quantity of stories and characters, images and metaphors.

1.2. An Age of Anxiety

These considerations cease to be abstract and become living matter in the writings of Quattrocento humanists. With the publications of two studies

respectively in 1983 and 2007, Remo L. Guidi, a former student of Eugenio Garin, has put out two massive databases of humanistic disquiet, providing solid ground for the historical foundation of an early-modern cultural thanatology. In his seminal *Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento in Italia e in Francia* (1957), Alberto Tenenti had already highlighted that between the Great Plague that struck Europe in fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth, the close relation between reflections on life with the thought of death entailed a change of focus from the attention to the vicissitudes of the sick body to a more profound meditation on time, and, more specifically, on that interval separating the present time from the future moment of death: "The minds of many, and of the humanists among these, were not as much occupied by the thought of the worms that would eventually inhabit their corpse or by the torments of agony, as they were by the thought of the journey that the body undertakes during its existence: they meditate on death but, more than anything else, *they felt to be dying*, and lived in the perpetual company of this inner sensation."⁴⁹

To support this thesis, Tenenti provides a number of humanists' texts and, among these, a letter dated July 1434 that Enea Silvio Piccolomini, pope Pius II, sent to Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, papal legate and president of the Council of Basel:

I believe there is nothing worse for man than to spend life in idleness and sloth. Indeed, the course of life is short and this very time is exposed to many accidents of fortune. There is no certainty of the future nor certain hope of tomorrow [...] When we have some leisure time, we should not spend it idly, hoping, as it often happens, for a longer term of

⁴⁹ Tenenti 1957, 60. Author's emphasis.

life in which we could write or to be awake for a long time; so that it will not happen to us what happens to many who, procrastinating their affairs to their old age, eventually fail in carrying them out because of intervening death or feeble health.⁵⁰

For Piccolomini, as for others,⁵¹ the thought of death, that is of future, urges a better use of time in the present, which is conceived essentially as the dimension where human affairs (the “negotia”) are enacted. In this perspective, the thought of death is seen as something that can be manipulated or channeled toward certain goals. This conception would undergo a dramatic change over the course of the fifteenth century, if a sharp and shrewd mind like that of the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini was able to completely overthrow the meaning of the humanist pope’s words: “Nature wants us to live according to the course, or the order, of this machine that is the world. Since nature did not want the world to remain inert and senseless, she gave us the property of not thinking about death, for if we did, the world would be full of sloth and torpor.”⁵² Both Piccolomini and Guicciardini see in death, and in the thought of it, a functionality that in Poliziano is completely absent. For Poliziano death cannot have any existential functionality, for it does not allow any piece of experience that may

⁵⁰ “Nihil, uti ego arbitror, homini potest esse deterius quam otio vitam tradere atque ignaviae. Cursus enim vitae brevis est, et id ipsum quo vivimus tempus multis fortunae casibus subiacet. Neque ulla futuri certitudo est neque crastini spes aliqua certa [...] Itaque, dum nobis superest otii quicquam, haud illud inertia praeterire debemus sperantes, ut saepe fit, vitae terminum longiorem, quo scribere aut evigilare possimus diu, ne nobis uti plerisque accidat, qui summa negotia differentes in senectutem, ea postea deseruere morte praeunti vel obstante valitudine” (Piccolomini 2007, 38).

⁵¹ “Some *maîtres à penser* [...] emphasized [...] the anxiety caused by the thought of death in order to awaken the torpid consciousness of many, and to lead it back towards a moral sensitivity otherwise difficult to retrieve” (Guidi 2007, 809).

⁵² “La natura ha voluto che noi viviamo secondo che ricerca el corso overo ordine di questa macchina mondana, la quale non volendo resti come morta e senza senso, ci ha dato proprietà di non pensare alla morte, alla quale se pensassimo, sarebbe pieno el mondo di ignavia e di torpore” (Guicciardini 1972, 82).

serve as practical means. He is more attracted to the dimension of void, as was happening to Leonardo da Vinci around that time, according to some notes he left in the cod. Arundel (f. 131r): “Of the large number of things that are around us, the being of nothingness dominates, and rules over the things that have no being; its essence stands by time, between past and future, and does not own the present.”⁵³

What instead Poliziano shares with Guicciardini was the focus on the present time, that entailed a constant existential negotiation with daily life and that soon became obsession for immanence. Precarious social and economic conditions certainly did not help. In May 1464, Poliziano’s father, Benedetto Ambrogini was killed by Paolo Del Mazza, belonging to a rival family of Montepulciano.⁵⁴ For the young Angelo, this resulted in a familiarity with death deriving, as in the case seen above, not from a reflection on the future, he was just ten years old at the time, but rather from a recent and dramatic past. For him, his father’s death did not represent exclusively an obvious psychological trauma but established a precarious sense of existence that would never abandon him. Indeed, from a merely material standpoint, from that moment onward, an age of financial straits opened for Poliziano, until he entered the Medici household, that is no later than December 1473.

It is then not surprising that poverty is the common background to some of his Latin epigrams of the late 1460s and the 1470s. Poliziano’s celebratory

⁵³ “Infra le magnitudine delle cose che sono infra noi, l’essere del nulla tiene il principato e ’l suo ufizio s’astende infra le cose che non àno l’essere, e la sua essentia risiede a presso del tempo, infra ’l preterito e ’l futuro, e nulla possiede del presente.” Quoted in Agamben 1982, 103.

⁵⁴ For this episode, see Del Lungo 1897, 13-27; Cecchini 1953.

willingness has to struggle against his ill-concealed impatience towards inattentive or miserly patrons, as in the case of the Cardinal Riario visiting Florence in August 1473 to whom he dedicates verses like these:

I gave you words, Sixtus: these are the gifts the poet seemly gives;
it is seemly that Sixtus gives back some money, but words he returns.
To be sure, we should say, he has those who give him words,
nonetheless, there is no one here who would give money.⁵⁵

In other instances, like in an epigram to Bartolomeo Fonzio, professor at the Studio fiorentino and future dedicatee of the first of Poliziano's great Latin works, the tones are more serious and the spirit somewhat more tense, as he seems to be urged to abandon the Muses:

Once learning was sweet to me, but envious
and smeary Poverty frightened my torn pockets.
So that now that the poet is the town's talk,
I reckon that it is better to surrender to times.⁵⁶

To be sure, it is no simple task to tell between the depiction of a poor man's real daily routine and literary mannerisms, as the poet's hardship is a classic literary topos, with illustrious precedents. Still, one should give credit to Poliziano's words, as at that time his biographical vicissitudes lead us to think that for him, as for his beloved Catullus, the purse must have been full of cobwebs.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Verba dedi Xisto; decet haec dare dona poetam:
aera decet Xistum reddere; verba refert.
Verum habet ille alios qui dent sibi verba, fatemur;
aera tamen qui nunc det nullus adest

(Del Lungo 1867, 113).

⁵⁶ Dulce mihi quondam studium fuit; invida sed me
Paupertas laceros terruit uncta sinus.
Nunc igitur, quoniam vates fit fabula vulgi,
esse reor satius cedere temporibus

(Del Lungo 1867, 109).

⁵⁷ The reference is obviously to the "sacculus plenus araneorum" in *Cat.* XIII, 8. Catullus must have exerted quite some influence on the compositions of epigrams like those above. The codex with Catullus' poems and those of the Latin elegiac authors "was,

But Poliziano's obsession with the negative aspects of reality did not cease after he secured a position at the Medici court, proving that material difficulties could only partially account for his pessimistic attitude. The patron's support and the early acquired prestige were not able to change the image of a melancholic Poliziano, irreparably tormented by disquieting thought. This image has been bequeathed to posterity in an extraordinary document, a letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Lorenzo's mother, that deserves a place of honor in Renaissance epistolarity:

Tutti sani.

Magnifica domina mea, le novelle che noi vi possiamo scrivere di qui sono queste: che noi habbiamo tanta acqua et sì continua che non possiamo uscire di casa, et habbiamo mutata la caccia nel giuoco di palla, perché e fanciulli non lascino l'exercitio. Giuchiamo comunemente o la scodella o il sapore o la carne, cioè che chi perde non ne mangi: et spesso spesso, quando questi miei scolari perdono, fanno un cenno a ser Umido. Altro non c'è che scrivervi per ora di nostre novelle.

Io mi sto in casa al fuoco in zoccoli et in palandrano, che vi parrei la malinconia se voi mi vedessi, ma forse mi paio io in ogni modo; et non fo né veggo né sento cosa che mi dilecti, i•m•modo mi sono accorato questi nostri casi. Et dormendo e vegghiando, sempre ho nel capo questa albagia. Eravamo due dì fa tutti in su l'ale, perché intendemo non esser costà più moria. Hora tutti siamo rimasti basosi, intendendo che pur va pizicando qualche cosa. Quando siamo costà habbiamo pur qualche refrigerio; quando non fussi mai altro se non veder ritornare Lorenzo sano a casa. Qui tuttavia dubitiamo, et d'ogni cosa. Et quanto a me, vi prometto che io affogo nella accidia in tanta solitudine mi truovo! Dico solitudine perché Monsignore si rinchiude in camera accompagnato solo da pensieri, et sempre lo truovo addolorato et impensierito, per modo che mi rinfresca più la malinconia a essere con lui. Ser Alberto del Malerba tutto di biascia ufficio con questi fanciulli. Rimangomi solo, et quando sono restucco dello studio, mi do a razolare tra le morie et guerre et dolore del passato et paura dell'avvenire. Né ho con chi crivellare queste mie fantasie. Non truovo qui

among those carried down to us, the oldest book of Poliziano's own library," and the *subscriptio* to the collation of Catullus' *carmina* dates to 12 August 1473 (Perosa, *Mostra*, 13). On Poliziano's reader of Catullus, see Gaisser 1993, 42-46. On his Latin epigrams, see Orvieto 2009, 156-166. On the topos of the poverty of the poet, see Veglia 2007 with literature.

la mia monna Lucrezia in camera, colla quale io possi sfogarmi, et muoio di tedio.⁵⁸

When Poliziano wrote this letter, on 18 December 1478, he had been in Cafaggiuolo, the Medicean estate near Pistoia where the family had sheltered because of the plague and the Italic wars, for six months, and already in July, he had showed signs of intemperance.⁵⁹ The poet's melancholy as described here shares several characters of the medieval "acedia", such as earthly *desperatio* ("the dark and presumptuous certainty of being already condemned beforehand and the complacent sinking into one's own destruction, as if nothing, least of all divine grace, could provide salvation"); *torpor* ("the obtuse and somnolent stupor that paralyzes any gesture that might heal us,") here almost graphically depicted in the image of the poet in coat and slippers sitting in front of a fire; *evagatio mentis* ("the flight of the will before itself, and the restless hastening from phantasy to phantasy,") which is what Poliziano names "albagia."⁶⁰ Finally, won by *curiositas* ("the insatiable desire to see for seeing's sake that disperses in always new possibilities": practically Poliziano's biography in a nut-shell), he feels nauseated ("restucco") by his work at the desk and ends up sinking into

⁵⁸ The letter is here reproduced as in the Salvadori edition in Tornabuoni 1993, 153-154; for the Del Lungo edition, see *Prose*, 67-69. I have to apologize with my readers if the quotation appears long and in the original language, but it is such a masterpiece of Italian vernacular prose that I thought it deserved to be reported as such. However, the ensuing commentary should help the reader understand in detail the content of the letter.

⁵⁹ "I am eagerly waiting for news that the plague is over, because I am worried for You and because I want to be back to serve You, as I thought and I wanted to be with You and to serve You. But since You, or rather, my bad luck put me in this position toward V[ostra] M[agnificenza], I shall bear it" (Del Lungo 1867, 57).

⁶⁰ Here in the very rare meaning of "fixation," or "reverie," cf. *GDLI*, *ad voc.*

gloomy reflections on the plague and the war.⁶¹ Indeed, the stay in Cafaggiuolo was not merry vacation: the predominant feeling was that of anguish for the people who were still in Florence and for news of and from them.

Here our attention should go, other than on this portrait of a young man as melancholic, that we can paint in the traditional Dürerian image, his chin on the palm and his elbow on the knee, to another element on which Poliziano insists on this letter: his isolation on at least three levels, material, social, and intellectual. Of the first, we have just spoken. To the second, Poliziano himself had touched upon it in a letter to Lorenzo dated 12 July: “and I take all the punches: te ‘propter Lybicae’ etc.”, with a clear reference to the showdown between Dido and Aeneas who was leaving for good the African shores.⁶² Poliziano refers to his third level of isolation when he speaks directly of his loneliness, singling out “Monsignore”, that is Gentile Becchi, and Alberto del Malerba, the ones, especially the first, who could serve as intellectual interlocutors.⁶³

⁶¹ I have here adopted the terminology Giorgio Agamben uses in his fine analysis of *De institutis coenobiorum* 1.10.2 (see Agamben 1993, 3-10). It must be said, nonetheless, that while Agamben suggests that according to the Neoplatonic ideals espoused by the Laurentian circle the negative elements of melancholy could be beneficially channeled in the Ficinian doctrine of the furor, I do not think that this can be extended to Poliziano, whose metaphysical interests have always been quite mild. On the vast literature on melancholy in fifteenth and sixteenth century, in addition to Agamben 1993, see Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1964; Couliano 1987; Brann 2002. On melancholy as literary topos see Ceserani 2007.

⁶² “Te propter Lybicae gentes Nomadumque tyranni
odere, infensi Tyrii”
(*Verg.* IV, 320-321) (“Because of you the peoples of Lybia and the princes of the Numidians/ hate me and the Tyrians are hostile”) (Del Lungo 1867, 58).

⁶³ Becchi, bishop of Arezzo since 1473, praeceptor to Giuliano and Lorenzo and faithful supporter of the Medicean cause, was a first rank figure. Malerba, otherwise unknown, seems to have been a modest priest, but he was apparently more stimulating company than Clarice, who is not even mentioned in the letter.

The detail helps us understand why Poliziano chose Lucrezia Tornabuoni as addressee of his heartfelt letter. Lucrezia was not just the mother and one of the most trusted advisors and close friend of Poliziano, but also an intellectual, as she was a poet herself and patroness of poetry, and had committed the epic poem *Morgante* to Luigi Pulgi: “donna è costì, che forse ascolta,/ che mi commise questa istoria prima” (*Morgante*, XXVIII, 2, 1-2).⁶⁴ That this lack of learned conversation is overwhelming for Poliziano, is testified, among other things, by some other letters, whose sender, ever more bored, apologizes for writing letter with no content: “Piero [Lorenzo’s elder son] keeps learning and writing, and becomes a skilled writer, so that he will soon relieve me from writing to you these letters ‘sine argumento’ which I write, a thing I am ashamed to do.”⁶⁵ The desire for learned conversation pushes against the “taedium vitae” that is taking a toll on him, as signalled by Poliziano’s nausea (“restucco”) for learning and studying, quite an unexpected feeling from this precocious genius.

But the feelings he harbors in the days of Cafaggiuolo and that Poliziano vents in the letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, do not describe a moment like many

⁶⁴ To give a sense of the intimacy between Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Poliziano, see the closure of the letter that the latter wrote to her on 25 May 1479: Per un’idea della misura della confidenza che esisteva tra la Tornabuoni e Poliziano, si veda la chiusa della lettera del 25 maggio del 1479: “I know that for You there is no one more intimate than me” [“e Voi so che più intrinseca spezialità non avete che la mia”] (Del Lungo 1867, 72). Poliziano had recently offered his advice in matter of literature (cf the letter dated 18 July 1479; Del Lungo 1867, 72-74) but their friendship went on for quite some time: on 6 June 1482, from her own library he had borrowed a “loyca d’Aristotile, greca, in papiro, de’ libri di Lucretia, coperto di bianco” (see *Protocolli*, 226-228; but also Gentile 1994, 178). This loan testify that Poliziano was interested in Aristotle very early in his career as a professor, and confirms the findings of Jonathan Hunt, who has edited a dialogue on scholastic logic by the Dominican Francesco di Tommaso dedicated to Poliziano in the early 1480s (see Hunt 1995, 13-33). For a profile of Lucrezia, see the introduction by Salvadori in Tornabuoni 1993, 3-45; Martelli 1996, 47-57.

⁶⁵ To Lorenzo, 20 September 1478 (Del Lungo 1867, 65).

others in his life. Indeed, when he says “I am at home close to the fire in coat and slippers so that I would look like melancholy itself if you looked at me, but perhaps I would look like I always look” this very last phrase makes us think that Poliziano was an habitual prey to melancholy. And in fact the *Latini* or “latinucci”, exercises of translation that Poliziano would assign to the young Piero, date to 1481, but still display in several instances his negative attitude towards life. The sixth of the *Latini* presents a “melancholic” synthomatology similar to the one we saw above:

After I was informed that my brother was almost dead, I started recognizing my adverse fortune, about which I had been oblivious for quite some time. Recently, I had thought that she [= fortune] was supposed to grant me what I desire, so that all the troubles I went to in my youth, could look like a small thing. But, alas!, how deceived I was! Now, I see that fortune does not placate for one’s good deeds, *so that not only learning and studying, but life itself is annoying me*. And with a reason: is there indeed anything I can enjoy from now on? *Where can I go to defeat melancholy?* I am greatly afraid to lose my eyes while I’m crying, and all senses, while I’m thinking about my troubles, *and there is no way I can find to heal this wound*.⁶⁶

There are several thematic analogies between the letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni and this “latinuccio,” and some textual and even syntactic similarities. There Poliziano said “I have no one with me to help dispel these haunting thoughts” [“né ho con chi crivellare queste mie fantasie”], while here he finds “no way to

⁶⁶ “Da poi [che]...restai advisato che ’l mio fratello è quasi rattatto, cominciai a riconoscere la mia avversa fortuna, la quale già buon pezo havevo dimenticato; hora mi pensavo io che ciò che io desiderassi, ella fussi apparecchiata a exaudire, in modo tale che tutte le fatiche le quali dalla prima fanciullezza havevo sopportate mi parevon leggieri. Ma tristo a me, quanto ero io ingannato! Ora vegho che per il ben fare costei niente si placa, in modo tale che mi è venuto in fastidio et non solo lo studio, ma anchora la vita, et ragionevolmente: imperoché è egli alcuna cosa della quale io m’habbi da qui innanzi a dilectare? Che luogho elegerò nel quale io possi questa mia malinconia ingannare? Temo grandemente di non perdere lacrimando li occhi et, pensando ai mia mali, tutti li sensi; né posso trovare alcun modo come io habbi questa piaga a medicare.” *Latini* VI. My emphasis.

heal this wound.” In the first case, as we suggested above, the point was on loneliness meant as lack of interlocutors, as if the cause of Poliziano’s disquiet were mostly social or relational, so to speak. In the latter case, that our humanist invokes not a person who could help him, but rather a way to escape this prison of the soul, opens new scenarios and eventually entrusts the therapy to an undefined medicine. In fact, Poliziano immediately abandons the excuse of the exercise--translating a letter informing Poliziano that his brother is sick, and soon, dead--to turn to more general considerations on human fragility exposed to capricious Fortune. If on the one hand for Poliziano Fortune is a personified entity (“costei”), on the other the focus is less on the effects of its unfathomable “actions” than on man’s deceptive expectations: “I had thought that she [= fortune] was supposed to grant me what I desire, so that all the troubles I went to in my youth, could look like a small thing. But, alas!, how deceived I was!” In other words: our destiny is not in our hands.

This “cosmic pessimism”--to quote a formula that has become a standard in the literary historiography on Giacomo Leopardi, an author that shares many features with Poliziano-- is best expressed in the last of the *Latini*:⁶⁷

This life flows like the water of a river, and human affairs tremble for a while to ruin eventually. Whoever is concerned for his glory in the posterity, should devote himself completely to learning, as it sets man free from death and makes him eternal. In order to achieve this, he should stay awake night and day. We should remind ourselves that we do not live at our own home but by someone else’s, and that in a little time we shall leave this room and go live another life. No one can escape this necessity

⁶⁷ There is no study comparing these two Italian authors, but for some interesting insights, see Perosa and Timpanaro 2000.

hanging over our head. [...] I am so frightened when I see the earth open and ready to swallow our bodies, that I do not dare to open my mouth.⁶⁸

At this point, one would be tempted to ask why so far I have been speaking of “thanatology” while Poliziano’s words and feelings seem more suitable for a nihilistic framework. The issue is not merely terminological, and entails a larger set of considerations, which will occupy the second part of this chapter.

1.3. Asclepius

It was Poliziano himself who created the thanatological discourse, for he anticipated, with the avail of classical mythology, the Rembrandtian image with which this chapter opened. The second Miscellany, the collection of philological essays that Poliziano started putting together in the summer of 1493 but which remained unpublished,⁶⁹ opens with the “necromantic metaphor”:⁷⁰

The second book of Cicero’s *De deorum natura* is found in all the new and even old exemplars to be no less mangled than once Hippolytus when ripped apart by unruly horses, whose limbs, cast about here and there as the fables say, Asclepius then gathered up, put back together, and restored to life, who himself is said then to have been struck by lightning out of the gods’ jealousy.⁷¹

⁶⁸ “Questa vita non altrimenti sdrucchiola che l’acqua d’un fiume, et le cose humane si dimenono un pezo et finalmente rovinano. Chi dunque cura la gloria apresso i posterì, dovrebe darsi tutto alli studi, li quali dalla morte liberono li omini et fannoli eterni: a questo non solo si vuol la notte, ma el dì vegliare. Ricordiamoci che noi non siamo in casa nostra, ma in casa d’altri; che non molto di poi ci bisognerà mutare questa stanza et ire ad habitare in una altra vita, et nessuno è che si possi fuggire questa necessità che sopra il capo ci pende. [...] Io ho sì gran paura quando vegho aperta la terra per inghiottire e corpi nostri, che io non ardisco pure d’aprir la bocca.” *Latini XX, passim*.

⁶⁹ See Branca 1983, 86 n.18.

⁷⁰ The phrase was coined by Greene 1982.

⁷¹ “Ciceronis liber secundus *De deorum natura* non minus lacer in omnibus novis, vetustis etiam exemplaribus reperitur quam olim fuerit Hippolytus turbatis distractus equis; cuius deinde avulsa passim membra, sicuti fabulae ferunt, Aesculapius ille collegit, reposuit, vitae reddidit; qui tamen deinde fulmine ictus ob invidiam deorum narratur. Me vero quae nam deterrebit invidia, quod fulmen, quo minus restituere ipsum sibi coner Romanae vel linguae vel philosophiae parentem, nescio equidem a quo rursus

But indeed, what envy or even lightning bolt will deter me from attempting to restore the very source of both the Roman language and philosophy, that one whose head and hands (do I not surely know?) Marc Anthony had cut off?⁷²

These two paragraphs summarize several aspects of Poliziano's writing: the mixture of mythological and historical information, leading to the incorporation of literary concern in scholarly work,⁷³ the precise indication of the *auctoritas* (i.e. by mentioning the work and even a section of it, and not just the author), the agonistic concept of scholarship ("envy"), the ominous punishment ensuing the hybris of curiosity,⁷⁴ the program of restoration of the classics, and the penchant for the horrific (dismembered bodies and severed limbs). Finally and more importantly, for what interests us here, Poliziano's self-representation as Asclepius in the opening of the second Miscellany, founds the very relation between philology and death.⁷⁵

In the past, Poliziano had already exploited the assimilation of the text with a body in the prefatory letter to the *Fabula di Orfeo* (late 1470s or early 1480s), addressed to the Mantuan nobleman Carlo Canale, where he rhetorically protested his (fictitious) opposition to the representation of the play:

Antonio truncatum capite et manibus?" (*Misc. II*, 1, 1-2) According to a version of the myth, Hippolytus was killed by a monster sent by Poseidon for the wish of Hippolytus' father Theseus, who falsely accused his son of an affair with his wife Phaedra. The quotations from the second Miscellany will be given according to the Branca and Pastore Stocchi edition, with the indication of the chapter and paragraph(s). Those from the first Miscellany will be instead taken from the 1553 Basileana (collated on the Aldine), with the indication of the page.

⁷² See Plutarch, *Lives*, Antonius, 20.

⁷³ I am here paraphrasing Reeve 2011, 259.

⁷⁴ A typical "metabolic device," for which see Chapter 3.

⁷⁵ On Poliziano's representation of the philologist, see S  ris 2005. The same image of Asclepius is in the first proemium to Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (1360-1374), which might have served as model for Poliziano's own prefatory chapter. Still, what especially distinguishes the latter is the emphasis on the materiality of the philological activity.

My most gentle messer Carlo, it was a custom among the Lacedaemonians, when some child of theirs was born either with maimed members or with strength impaired, to expose him immediately, and to not keep him alive, for they judged such progeny to be unworthy of the Lacedaemonians. Thus, I did hope that the *Fabula di Orfeo*, which I composed at the request of our most reverend Cardinal of Mantua, in two days, amidst constant tumults, and in vernacular, so that the spectators could better understand, would be, not unlike Orfeo himself, dismembered, as I was aware that this little daughter of mine was of the kind to bring his father dishonor.⁷⁶

But in general terms, as we shall see further in the present study, the world of Poliziano is populated by suffering people and lacerated texts. Still, the necromantic metaphor accounts for the power of philology.

This leads us to a second answer to the question asked above: why thanatology and not nihilism? Thanatology, contrarily to the totalizing dimension of nihilism, entails what we may call, for lack of a better word, a “residue,” a space of possibility pertaining to human agency (nihilism would tolerate no Asclepius.) For Poliziano this “space” is neither an object of metaphysics, nor of ethics--subjects seldom touched upon. Rather, it is an epistemological space, occupied by philology, here meant as ecdotics or textual criticism.⁷⁷ This has, in

⁷⁶ “Solevano i Lacedemonii, humanissimo messer Carlo mio, quando alcuno loro figliuolo nasceva o di qualche membro impedito o delle forze debile, quello exponere subitamente, né permettere che in vita fussi riservato, giudicando tale stirpa indegna di Lacedemonia. Così desideravo ancora io che la fabula di Orptheo, la quale a requisizione del nostro reverendissimo Cardinale Mantuano, in tempo di dua giorni, intra continui tumulti, in stilo vulgare perché dagli spectatori meglio fusse intesa havevo composta, fussi di subito, non altrimenti che esso Orptheo, lacerata: cognoscendo questa mia figliuola essere qualità da far più tosto al suo padre vergogna che honore.” The letter is published in *Orfeo*, 1-11. For the translation I used, with additions and modifications, the one I found in Silverman 2009, 96.

⁷⁷ According to different cultural traditions and academic practices, the word “philology” has eventually come to define different activities. In general, we can distinguish between a wider notion of philology that defines “those activities that study methodically the language of man and the works of arts composed in this language” (Auerbach 1970, 13). In the narrower notion, philology coincides with textual criticism or

turn, two consequences: the first, which will be discussed in the last chapter, deals with philology from the standpoint of its results--that is as the space accommodating some form of stable truth--and its relation with philosophy.⁷⁸ The second involves the idea of philology as the method allowing the scholar to reach that (textual) truth.

Poliziano's claim to fame in the history of textual criticism relies on the fact that he anticipated three key ecdotic techniques, which then became standard philological practices.⁷⁹ First, in order to reconstruct a text corrupted by time or man's agency (an operation called "emendatio"), he relied mostly on manuscripts, codices or printed editions ("witnesses") containing other versions of the "same" text ("emendatio ope codicum"). Second, Poliziano sensed that the witnesses involved in the "emendatio" were often related, and that, through a comparative analysis of the textual errors that they reproduced, they could offer no added value with respect to the witnesses of the same family; as a consequence, some of them should not be taken into account for the reconstruction of the original text ("eliminatio codicum descriptorum"). Finally, Poliziano "already understood that the manuscripts (at least the oldest and most valuable ones) had to be collated not occasionally but systematically, registering

ecdotics, and has as its main goal the reconstruction of a text. See Altschul 2010, with literature.

⁷⁸ In the last chapter another feature of thanatology will be discussed, that regarding the notion of "limit," as in item no.2 of the *Manifesto of Thanatology*: "Thanatology...can be considered as the study of the 'limit' of anything pertaining to human existence, including knowledge" (item no. 2).

⁷⁹ The bibliography of the subject is vast. The reader may consult Timpanaro 2005 [but orig. publ. 1960]; Grafton 1977 and 1983; Branca 1983; Rizzo 1983; Fera 1990. All with literature. I am here especially following Timpanaro 2005, 46-54.

all the readings that diverged from the vulgate text, including those that were certainly erroneous but that might turn out to be useful for restoring the text.”⁸⁰ The insights behind these techniques, as dry as they may seem, betray a cautious mind at the least.⁸¹ They all depart from the necessity of minimizing the impact of those types of corrections made on the text that were based mostly on the editor’s intuition, like conjecture or “divination.” As Silvia Rizzo writes:

for the humanists, conjecture corresponds to one of the two rules of ‘emendare,’ [...] that is to the ‘ratio’ (cf Poliziano, *Misc.* I, 75: “si rationi libera coniectura sit”): it is the outcome of a reasoning, of a deduction grounded on ‘argumenta’, and one resorts to it when none of the manuscripts offers a satisfactory reading (cf. Poliziano, *Misc.* II, 15, 1-10) [...] Poliziano hence resorts to the conjecture only as the last course of action. [...] The humanists oppose to ‘coniectura’ the ‘divinatio,’ which does not have, nonetheless, the modern technical meaning. Whereas ‘coniectura’ belongs in the realm of verisimilitude, and *can* be supported by reasoning, ‘divinatio’ is something irrational, almost a form of divine inspiration. [Author’s emphasis.]⁸²

But the vicissitudes of that quest for truth can also be followed from within, through an examination of some of his philological essays contained in both his Miscellanies, the first published in 1489 and the second unpublished. The exposition will likely seem unsystematic to the reader, and cannot be anything but, at least as far as Poliziano meant it: with the obvious exclusion of the first and last chapter, the Miscellanies are indeed “silvae”, “woods” that are accessible from anywhere and connected by no path. Still, the various “trees” and “plants” contained therein, are recognizable in every single detail, and easily detectable, as each essay is labeled by a single-worded rubric around which it revolves, and is finally indexed. The result is that of a remarkable variety in a

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸¹ In the last chapter I shall argue that this is a form of skepticism.

⁸² Rizzo 1973, 287-293, *passim*, with slight modifications of format. Lorenzo Valla was instead the champion of brilliant conjecture, see Regoliosi 1986.

unity of intent. As Vittore Branca once stated: “it was hence confirmed what for our masters was the first rule of textual criticism, that is, that the landing place of philology is the individuality of the [textual] problem: each work implies a different and typical problem, and each problem must be solved on the basis of what itself offers.”⁸³

The first logical implication of Poliziano’s method is the direct access to the primary source and the consequent cautious handling of secondary texts. In *Misc.* II, 3 Poliziano expounds on a passage from Horace’s *Epistles* (I, 5, 28) where the poet invites to dinner his friend Torquatus adding that he may bring along whom he wants, as “there is place also for many ‘shades.’” In this essay he explains how he came to the conclusion that word “umbrae” (“shades”) means “table companions”: “Certainly it is quite difficult for anyone to accept that ‘shades’ means ‘companions’ or ‘table mates’, or for the term to seem to imply this, if one consults only the commentaries that now exist on this poet and not dig deeper into the letter and antiquity. But whoever has read Book VII of Plutarch’s *Symposiaca* will come upon an acceptable account for this semi-translation.”⁸⁴

The habit of explaining a Latin locus by recurring to Greek sources, even retroactively as in the just mentioned case of Plutarch, is one of the typical feature of Poliziano’s methodology, and one in which few scholars could be his equal.⁸⁵ It is, for instance, the case of *Misc.* I, 29 where he elucidates through a passage from Eustathius the meaning of the expression “Teuthrantia turba” in Ovid’s *Tristia*: “the reason why [the daughters of Thespis] are called Teuthrantia

⁸³ Branca 1977, 34.

⁸⁴ See Plut., *Moralia*. 707.

⁸⁵ See Dionisotti 1968.

crowd is such an unknown notion that some lousy interpreters dare to read ‘Thespeia’ instead of “Teuthrantia,” showing an excess of ignorance and impudence. I found it in Eustathius, the interpreter of Homer, especially when in the *Catalog* he explains, etc.”⁸⁶

Some other times, it is not just the text that has undergone the offense of time but its very support. For instance, if we turn again to *Misc.* II, 1 we see that with specific reference to Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, the necromantic metaphor had a specific material counterpart. In Poliziano-Asclepius’ hands there is indeed a dismembered object: he noticed that the “entire order [of the codex of Cicero’s treatise] is perverted and completely mangled, so that some segments of the text intrude randomly into the midst of other portions [...] Thus, since we must pass through a full eleven pages [at a time], we are able to follow this text because it was written then, it seems to me, in personalized scripts [i.e., individually distinctive ones]; for one characteristic script follows another, that a pattern reveals itself in the manuscript.” Finally, he describes at length and in great detail how to gather together the different pages and “quinternions.”⁸⁷

I have reported these examples in order to give a glimpse of the variety and complexity of Poliziano’s practice. Now I would like to conclude with one last fragment from the second Miscellany, to show how the pressing negative forces

⁸⁶ “Cur autem Teuthrantia turba vocentur, hoc tam plerisque incompertum atque ignotum est, ut audeant literatores pro illo *Teuthrantia*, *Thespeia* reponere, nimisquam improbe insciteque. Nos de eo invenimus apud Eustathium Homeri interpretem, ubi maxime *Catalogum* enarrat [Greek text follows]” (*Op.*, 251).

⁸⁷ “...praeposterus atque omnino perturbatus hic ordo omnis est sic ut in aliarum partium locum partes aliae temere incurrerent [...] quod autem paginas totiens iubemus xi evolvi, modum secuti sumus eius voluminis quod tunc nobis haec prodentibus erat in manibus; alius enim aliud sequetur, ut in suo cuique codice ratio ostenderit” (*Misc.* II, 1, 7 and 19).

falling under the thanatological inquiry had an impact on Poliziano. It is an essay on Pausanias' *Ibis* and, more in particular, on the edition that the scholar Domizio Calderini had provided of this work. Throughout his philological works, Poliziano is in general critical towards Calderini, but it is a criticism that at times betrays an undeniable admiration. It is not the case of this essay on the *Ibis*, but whatever Poliziano's conclusions might be, he cannot but acknowledge that the sea of antiquity is vast and its complete access lost forever:

But to the extent that I seemed a bit more agitated towards that particular person than others, the reason was that, even though I acknowledge, and not to a small degree, his natural ability, I despised that he had committed outrageous disgraces in his literary studies, doing so time and again, and asserting as truth those things that he had made up himself however he pleased, lest it seem at all that there was some book that he didn't know, even though to the contrary there was not one of the Latin books, I think, that we professors fully understand. For we grant that the loss of the ancient commentaries is greater than what would allow the rest to now be explained, and the exemplars are so corrupted in many passages that not even vestiges of an intact text remain.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ *Misc.* II, 5, 2-3: "Sed quod in virum illum paulo commotior sum visus quam in ceteros, causa fuit quod, hominis ingenio non minimum tribuens, indignabar flagitia fecisse illum in studiis capitalia mandantem litteris ea saepenumero proque veris asseverantem quae ipse sibi ex commodo confinxisset nequid esse omnino videretur in libris quod ignoraret; cum contra nullus apud Latinos sit liber (ut arbitror) quem professores ad liquidum intellegamus. Nam et commentariorum veterum iacturam maiorem facimus quam ut explicari iam cuncta possint, et exemplaria locis multis adeo mendosa sunt ut ne vestigia quidem supersint integrae lectionis."

CHAPTER TWO

2.1. Under the Laurel

In 1470 Poliziano presented Lorenzo de' Medici with a translation of Book II of the *Iliad* in Latin verses.⁸⁹ The gift was exceptional for many reasons, but chiefly because it came from a fifteen year old and was not in the Italian vernacular, but in Latin. Apparently, Lorenzo was so impressed that he eventually admitted Poliziano into the Medici's household as his secretary. Lavish praise also came from other contemporaries, and the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino, arguably the dominating cultural figure in Florence in those years, acknowledged Poliziano as "homericus adulescens."⁹⁰ By dedicating the work to Lorenzo, Poliziano was designating him as a subject worthy of a treatment written in an epic voice. Further, he created a classical counterpart to the vernacular *La giostra del Magnifico Lorenzo de' Medici*, composed by Luigi Pulci in 1469 to celebrate the Medici's victory in a joust.⁹¹ Contemporaneously, he posited himself in a two-fold intellectual line of succession: that of Homer--the greatest poet among the ancients--and that of Carlo Marsuppini, humanist and faithful Medici partisan, whose translation of the *Iliad*, interrupted due to his death in 1453, was carried on by Poliziano. Finally, the fact that he was doing this with a translation from Greek to Latin, and not with a "volgarizzamento"--i.e.

⁸⁹ For the translation, see Maier 1969, 83-98; Cerri 1970; Levine Rubinstein 1983.

⁹⁰ Ficino's remark is to be found in his letters (see Ficino 1988, I, 40.)

⁹¹ Pulci 1986, 61-120.

with the Italian vernacular as a target language--certainly testifies to Poliziano's boastful inclinations, but also to his attitude towards classical languages.⁹²

This episode, besides confirming Lorenzo's legendary intuition for talent, as demonstrated in the better-known cases of Botticelli and Michelangelo, testifies to Poliziano's awareness of the identity-fashioning power of classicism, even at such an early stage in his career. The study of the role of classicism in relation to patronage represents the scope of the present chapter. Here, I will explore its connections with Lorenzo's cultural policy, and argue for Poliziano's crucial contribution to its reorientation toward a classicist stance. In developing my argument, I will discuss the relationship between language and power in Lorenzo's ideology, and both Lorenzo's and Poliziano's attitudes toward the Italian vernacular and Latin. Finally, I will examine how, in the critical aftermath of Lorenzo's death, Poliziano adopts the identity making power of classicism in order to furnish himself with a novel identity, that of the "grammaticus."

To understand the role that Poliziano played in Lorenzo's cultural policy, we should first look at how this cultural policy was conceived and organized. Following the studies of Mario Martelli, to whom we owe its most comprehensive and persuasive account, from the standpoint of literary production, we can broadly distinguish four main trends in Lorenzo's cultural policy: an expressionistic one, represented by a poet like Luigi Pulci, the author of *Morgante*; a philosophical one, dominated by Marsilio Ficino; a philological-

⁹² For a discussion of the vernacular *vis-à-vis* Latin, I will use "Italian vernacular," "vernacular," "Tuscan" interchangeably.

erudite one, embodied by Angelo Poliziano, and a religious-theological one, influenced by the preaching of Girolamo Savonarola.⁹³ The use of “trends,” rather than “programs,” is meant to call attention to the fact that we can barely detect any form of central cultural planning on the part of Lorenzo and the intellectuals in his circle. It would thus be more suitable, I believe, to envisage their literary achievements as revolving around the notion of “occasion,” and around that which, consequently, is indicated by “occasional literature.” Regarding this term, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* provides the following definition: “Poetry written for or prompted by a special occasion, e.g. a wedding, funeral, anniversary, birth, military or sporting victory, or scientific achievement. Poetic forms especially associated with occasional verse are the epithalamion, the elegy, and the ode.”⁹⁴ Another definition adds emphasis to the ephemeral nature of such poetry: “Poetry written in commemoration of an event. Though much occasional verse succumbs to time, a number of examples have survived the occasions for which they were written.”⁹⁵

Occasional poetry constituted a good deal of the humanists’ literary production and Poliziano was no exception. For example, in a letter he complains to his Venetian friend, Girolamo Donà, about being constantly urged to compose extemporaneous poetry for the most diverse reasons: “For if anyone wants a

⁹³ Martelli 1992b, 40. Martelli’s outline is designed with reference to the political use of the Italian vernacular on Lorenzo’s part: “individuare [...] i precisi punti di intersezione tra l’azione dell’uomo politico e l’operosità del poeta apparirà particolarmente fertile, non foss’altro perché, se è vero che uno di questi punti, forse il più importante, deve essere indicato nella diversità dei successivi compiti al cui assolvimento Lorenzo chiamò il volgare, inteso non meno come simbolo politico che come strumento espressivo” (*ibid.* 39.)

⁹⁴ Baldick 2004, *ad voc.* The definitions provided by this source, all of which regard literature in verse, can be extended to prose as well.

⁹⁵ Beckson and Ganz 1989, 167.

motto fit to be read on the hilt of a sword or the signet of a ring, if anyone wants a line of verse for a bed or a bedroom, if anyone wants something distinctive (not for silver, mind you, but for pottery pure and simple!), then straightaway he dashes over to Poliziano.”⁹⁶ On one hand, this statement appears the hyperbolic and dismissive whine of a well-established poet--the letter is indeed dated April 22, 1490--on the other, we know that many of his juvenile Latin epigrams and Greek poems fall in this category. However, there were other times in which this literary activity acquired a different import, such as when the contingent nature of the events treated could be turned into political value: occasion could become action. In order to do so, Lorenzo and Poliziano aimed at designing an ideology in which the products of occasional poetry could be seen not as isolated elements but as components of a comprehensive discourse. Clearly, such an ideology displayed the traditional aspects of encomiastic literature, but it also went well beyond it. Indeed, Poliziano’s two most overtly political works, the *Stanze per la giostra* and his account of the Pazzi conspiracy, the *Pactianae coniurationis commentarium* (a celebratory Medicean epic and a pro-Medicean historical pamphlet), do not fall, strictly speaking, in the above mentioned category, as they are intrinsically celebratory. Instead, what is novel and distinctive in the Laurentian cultural ideology is the conferment of political significance to an event that has little or no political import. A few examples will serve to illustrate my point.

⁹⁶ “Nam si quis breve dictum quod in gladii capulo vel in anuli legatur emblemata, si quis versum lecto aut cubiculo, si quis insigne aliquod, non argento dixerim, sed fictilibus omnino suis desiderat, illico ad Politiano cursitat” (Butler 2006, 13).

In 1485 the late Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on architecture, *De re aedificatoria*, appeared in print for the first time. The preface to this princeps edition was a dedicatory letter by Poliziano to Lorenzo (later collected in Poliziano's *Liber epistularum* [Ep. X, 7]), which begins with these words:

Leon Battista Florentine, of the illustrious Alberti family, man of refined mind, of very sharp judgment, and of most exquisite erudition, in addition to several other remarkable literary monuments that he left to posterity, composed ten books on architecture. He was going to publish these books that were almost fully corrected and polished *and ready to be dedicated to your name*, when he died a natural death. [The emphasis is my own.]⁹⁷

Besides what Poliziano says here, we have no other evidence that Alberti was going to dedicate his treatise to Lorenzo. In fact, according to the sixteenth century biographer of Federico da Montefeltro, Bernardino Baldi, the Duke of Urbino was the most likely dedicatee of the treatise, but when Leon Battista died, Poliziano, laboriously but successfully, took pains to persuade Alberti's cousin and editor Bernardo to honor Lorenzo instead.⁹⁸ The goal of Poliziano's machinations was one of cultural policy aimed at disputing with Rome for the primacy on the study of architecture and its classical antecedents. Poliziano, perpetually in touch with the Roman cultural circles in the hope that a position at the papal Curia might open for him, must have heard that the humanist Sulpicio da Veroli was preparing an edition of Vitruvius's *De architectura*.⁹⁹ Moreover,

⁹⁷ "Baptista Leo Florentinus, ex clarissima Albertorum familia, vir ingenii elegantis, acerrimi iudicii, exquisitissimaeque doctrinae, cum complura alia egregia monumenta posteris reliquisset, tum libros elucubravat de architectura decem, quos propemodum emendatos perpolitosque editurus iam iam in lucem, ac tuo dedicaturos nomini, fato est functus." I quote from the Aldine edition (nvii[v]), with the correction of the reading "monimenta" to "monumenta." The letter is commented on in Patetta 1996.

⁹⁸ See *ibid.* 240-41.

⁹⁹ For Poliziano's attempts to secure a position in the Roman Curia, see Bianca

Sulpicio was a protégé of cardinal Raffaele Riario, in turn nephew of pope Sixtus IV, both heavily involved in the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478, in which Lorenzo was wounded and his brother Giuliano murdered. Thus, in Poliziano's and Lorenzo's minds, if this project could not be stopped, it would at least need to be countered. In the end, their expectations were fulfilled, as Alberti's princeps was released months before its Vitruvian counterpart.

We can trace another example of political exploitation of the "occasion" back to the ideological framework of the culture wars between Florence and Rome in the 1480s. With the death of pope Sixtus IV Riario in August 1484, and the subsequent decline of Riario's fortunes, Lorenzo launched a sort of policy of appeasement toward the freshly elected Innocent VIII Cybo, and Poliziano was sent to Rome with the Florentine congratulatory delegation.¹⁰⁰ On this occasion the Pope invited him to pick a Greek work that narrated the deeds of the Roman emperors and translate it into Latin, a task that Poliziano, in the letter that accompanied the translation, stated that he completed only three years later--quite a long time for someone who claimed to have composed the pastoral drama *Orfeo* in two days!¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, a unique volume was being prepared in the Medicean workshop: Poliziano's translation was embedded in a codex of precious parchment, inscribed by the talented copyist Neri Rinuccini, and lavishly illuminated by one of the greatest miniaturists of the time, Attavante degli Attavanti.¹⁰² Here, again, we have a tactical epistolary preface and carefully

1998.

¹⁰⁰ See Martelli 1992a, 67.

¹⁰¹ See *Orfeo* 1994, 1-3.

¹⁰² A discussion of this codex (Rome, V. E. 1005) and of the "Herodian affair" is in

orchestrated timing. In the letter Poliziano somewhat curiously ascribed the reasons for his delay to the political unrest that had affected Italy in recent times: only now, thanks to Innocent's and Lorenzo's combined efforts, peace had been reestablished and he could actually complete his literary enterprise. For Poliziano, the translation constituted a *captatio benevolentiae* toward the Pope in one of his many attempts to access the Roman Curia; for Lorenzo it functioned as a new instance of his cultural policy. Now that years of vicious hostilities were over, the moment had arrived not to *contrast* Roman primacy on the international political scene, but rather to *extend* the Florentine influence in the heart of the former adversary. To accomplish such an endeavor, in 1487 Lorenzo started a massive campaign in order to obtain the largest possible amount of ecclesiastical benefices for his son Giovanni, in order to prepare his escalation to the cardinalate.¹⁰³ We can read the events of that very summer in the same light, when the precious "Herodian" arrived in the hands of Innocent VIII, along with the events of the following November, when Lorenzo's favorite daughter, Maddalena, arrived in the hands of the Pope's son, the notoriously unpleasant Franceschetto Cybo. Rome was conquered, as we can infer from the words of a Ferrarese ambassador: "The Pope sleeps with the eyes of the Magnificent Lorenzo."¹⁰⁴

Gionta 2008.

¹⁰³ Giovanni de' Medici was formally nominated cardinal in 1489, but being too young to effectively occupy that position, it was agreed that the appointment remain secret for three years, although in the Medicean party no one was able to keep this information to himself. He eventually became Pope under the name of Leo X in 1513, at age 37. See Hook 1984, 179.

¹⁰⁴ Hook 1984, 170.

A third and final instance of what we have been discussing so far regards the prologue to the Plautinian play *Menaechmi*.¹⁰⁵ Between March 12-14, 1488, a group of youngsters, instigated by the sermons of Bernardino da Feltre, a formidable Franciscan preacher who admonished against usury and advocated the expulsion of the Jews from Florence, attacked a Jewish moneylender named Manuellino. For Lorenzo, this was a further reason to worry about Bernardino: not only had Bernardino repeatedly and vehemently reproached the allegedly neopagan Florentine lifestyle, of which he deemed Lorenzo's circle responsible, now he was turning against an essential operator of the Medicean economy, as Lorenzo's finances at that moment heavily depended on loans handled by the Jews. In order to counter Bernardino's influence on the youth, and on the general Florentine population, Lorenzo commissioned the pious (and philo-Medicean) ser Paolo Comparini, canon of the basilica of San Lorenzo, to produce a comedy by the Latin poet Plautus entitled *Menaechmi*. Lorenzo's hoped to promote an image of a religious man different from that of Bernardino's, a man in whom piety and joyous love for classical learning could happily coexist.¹⁰⁶ These goals are apparent in the prologue to the comedy that Comparini asked Poliziano to compose. Poliziano, who was on his way to Rome (again in only two days!), returned a vibrant and poignant prologue. The Franciscans, traditionally associated with good spirit and laughter, were depicted in a rather gloomy fashion, while Comparini was represented as one of those savvy masters of antiquity who entrusted their young students to a comedian so that they could be

¹⁰⁵ See Bombieri 1985; Bausi 1991; Martelli 1995, 13-18; 62-71.

¹⁰⁶ This can be inferred from Poliziano's letter to Comparini that accompanied the prologue (*Ep.* VII, 15).

exposed to theater.¹⁰⁷ To give an idea of how such an occasion could be effectively exploited in propagandistic terms, it is worth highlighting the brilliance of a passage from the *vituperatio* against the Franciscans, never explicitly mentioned but obviously alluded to in what follows: “Those are the worst, those who are loud, capricious,/ hooded, wood-footed, girded with ropes,/ a supercilious, wry-necked herd” (vv. 40-42).¹⁰⁸ Here, “hooded” renders the Latin “cucullati” what would have been, for a Florentine audience, unequivocally reminiscent of Dante, *Par.* XXII, 76-78, wherein he condemns the corruption of the Franciscans, whose hoods or cowls, the “cocolle” indeed, now serve as recipient of what they have stolen: “The walls, which used to be an abbey, have become dens, and the cowls are sacks full of foul meal.”¹⁰⁹

These three examples--and, indeed, many others could have been cited--show how closely and intensely Poliziano and his patron worked to promote Laurentian cultural hegemony, and how very little seemed to be left to chance.¹¹⁰ It can be debated as to whether Lorenzo and Poliziano were just particularly keen on seizing the occasion, or if these initiatives were planned ahead of time. Indeed, on one hand, we can exclude the existence of an articulated and scheduled cultural program on Lorenzo’s part, and on the other we can safely assume that

¹⁰⁷ This latter point is a (intentional?) misunderstanding of a passage from Quintilian (*Inst. or.* 1.11.1), is discussed in Martelli 1995, 69.

¹⁰⁸ “Hi sunt praecipue quidem clamosi, leves,
cucullati, lignipedes, cincti funibus,
superciliosum, incurvicervicum pecus.”

¹⁰⁹ “Le mura che solien esser badia/ fatte son spelonche, e le cocolle/ sacca son piene di farina ria.” The English translation is taken from the Singleton’s edition (see Alighieri 1970). This reference is signaled in Martelli 1995, 71 n. 41.

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, Martelli 1995, 19-32.

the link between literature and power for him was a matter of primary importance.

Hindsight can help us explain Lorenzo's seemingly counterintuitive responses to Poliziano's moves during that multiple crises that eventually led to the temporary rupture of their relationship (the so called "discessio") in 1479-80. The first of these crises, a controversy around the assignment of the priory of San Paolo near Florence, took place in the summer of 1477. When Poliziano, in constant pursuit of economic sustenance, was informed that the highly sought after ecclesiastical benefice was going to be assigned not to him, as both Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici had implied, but to one of their relatives, the situation escaped his control. Consequently, he wrote Lorenzo a rather harsh letter, incredulous in the incipit ("I am not complaining about you or me, but about fortune. I cannot recognize this gesture as yours: indeed usually Lorenzo abides by his promises") and bitterly sarcastic in the explicit ("I shall write on my forehead: 'I trusted Lorenzo, who would not trust him? Therefore, if it is the case of a hanging, I shall have the consolation to be hanged to a golden beam.'").¹¹¹ A year later, Poliziano, in his capacity as preceptor of Lorenzo's children, was in the Medici estate of Cafaggiuolo near Pistoia, where the Magnificent was urged to send his family at the outburst of both the war and the plague. In what shortly revealed itself as a veritable *captivitas Pistoriensis*, Poliziano soon was at war

¹¹¹ "Non de te nec de me, sed de fortuna conqueror. Nam tuum hic nihil agnosco: solet enim Laurentius stare promissis;" "Inscribam fronti: 'Laurentio credidi: quis autem non credat?. Ergo, si pendendum fuerit, hoc solatio utar quod pendebo ex trabe aurea.'" The controversy over the priory of St. Paul is reconstructed by Picotti 1955, 32-37; 69-71, to be integrated with Martelli 1980b, 280 n. 39.

with Clarice Orsini, Lorenzo's wife.¹¹² The reasons for their mutual hostility are the matter of debate and speculation, but on the basis of some extant letters it seems safe to assume that their divergences revolved around the education of little Piero de' Medici, Lorenzo's first-born.¹¹³ Additionally, we must take into account both Clarice's rigid demeanor, which was likely worsened by her poor health and her haughty attitude (she hailed from the Orsini, one of the most ancient and distinguished families in the Roman aristocracy), and Poliziano's notoriously touchy disposition, in turn likely aroused by the paranoid atmosphere of those months, when contact with people outside the estate was limited for fear of contagion ("we do not accept presents, if we exclude some greens, figs, some flasks of wine, some birds and similar things.").¹¹⁴ The situation inevitably came to a head in May 1479, when Clarice expelled Poliziano from Cafaggiuolo. That afterwards he immediately had to ask Lorenzo for his books that he had left behind gives a glimpse into the rapidity and harshness of his expulsion.¹¹⁵ Scholars, however, unanimously agree that the ultimate test of the relationship between Poliziano and Lorenzo came when the former allegedly refused to accompany the latter in the critical and potentially fatal mission to Naples, aimed

¹¹² On Clarice, see the information scattered throughout Tomas 2003, with literature.

¹¹³ See the letter from August 26, 1478 in Del Lungo 1867, 60 and the letter XVI in *ibid.* 63.

¹¹⁴ "Non si accetta presenti, da insalate, fichi e qualche fiasco di vino o qualche beccafico o simili cose infuori": Poliziano's words in a letter to Lorenzo dated August 31, 1478 (*ibid.* 61-62). For the relationship between Clarice and Poliziano see Picotti 1955, 39-54. Picotti tends to ascribe the harshness of this relationship to the social distance between the two and seems to reject other scholars' suggestions that emphasize the rumors concerning Poliziano's private habits, which circulated during his life and especially after his death and were collected by Del Lungo 1897, 255-79. On this point see also Branca 1983, 322-28; Dionisotti 1985; Stewart 1997, esp. 60-63. Important findings in Rocke 1998, 198, 202, 310 n. 164, 317 n. 11, 318 n. 22.

¹¹⁵ Picotti 1955, 72-73. See also the letter in Del Lungo 1867, 70.

at persuading King Ferrante to come to a separate peace with Florence and put an end to the war.¹¹⁶ To date the only extant document that allows us to shed some light on this episode is an epistle that Poliziano wrote to Lorenzo from the Gonzaga's court in Mantua on March 19, 1480, where he was temporarily staying while he tested the waters for a coveted return to Florence.¹¹⁷ In this lengthy and contrite letter, which is aptly titled *Apologia*, Poliziano fully acknowledges Lorenzo as a sincere, zealous patron and as a most loving father, emphasized by his own unshakable loyalty and the services he has offered as preceptor. He finally provides his own version of the "Neapolitan accident," which, for him, was nothing but an unfortunate *quid pro quo*.¹¹⁸

In all these episodes, Lorenzo's demeanor is baffling: in his customary role of problem-solver he offered allowances that went well beyond Poliziano's expectations. In October 1477, Poliziano was formally appointed prior of San Paolo: "There was some delay, and if I acted foolishly, this made me realize the love and affection you have for me. I have very well calculated every single thing, so that I know how much I am obliged toward you."¹¹⁹ Here we find the same happy ending as in the Cafaggiuolo controversy: the preceptor was restored in his function a few days after his expulsion from the Medicean estate (so that "Piero would not lose what he has learned with such great an effort,") and the books

¹¹⁶ See De Angelis 1992.

¹¹⁷ For Poliziano's trip to the North of Italy, see Branca 1983, 55-72.

¹¹⁸ This letter can be read in Picotti 1955, 73-82. Verde 1973-, IV, I, 381 speaks of "equivoco."

¹¹⁹ "Lo indugio c'è stato, quando io fussi stato insensato, m'arebbe fatto conoscere l'amore et affezione mi portate; ho molto bene misurato ogni cosa, in modo che io conosco quale obbligo ho con Voi." Poliziano to Lorenzo, letter from October 19, 1477 (Del Lungo 1867, 55.)

were returned to him.¹²⁰ A year later, Lorenzo's reaction to the *Apologia* was even more baffling, not only because Poliziano's (alleged) refusal to accompany him to Naples could be read as an offense addressed directly against Lorenzo, but also because it had happened a few months after he had already complied with Poliziano's aforementioned requests. As a matter of fact, between the end of April and the beginning of May 1480, Poliziano returned from Mantua and for the second time he was readmitted into the Medici household, as well as reinstated as preceptor. Less than a month later Lorenzo gave him a little farm near Fiesole, on the hills overlooking Florence--that "rusculum Faesulanum" (*Gell.* 19.9.1), which will soon become Poliziano's philological workshop.¹²¹ To top it all off, by the end of May, on Lorenzo's impulse, the *Ufficiali dello Studio* designated Poliziano professor of rhetoric and poetics in the university of Florence.¹²²

We can hardly ground such generosity solely in the Lorenzo's benign attitude toward his protégé, and justify it as a means for him to attract Poliziano back to Florence, now that in Mantua he had been nominated "commensale

¹²⁰ "[. . .] non habbia a perdersi quello che ha acquistato pure con assai fatica." Lorenzo to Clarice (Lorenzo de' Medici, *Lettere*, IV, 80.) The delay in the restitution of the books to Poliziano seems to be the episode that aggravated the Magnificent the most: "Mona Clarice, io ho avuto molto per male che, secondo vi feci dire da ser Niccolò [Michelozzi], e libri non sieno stati consegnati a messer Agnolo, et che messer Bernardo [Michelozzi, brother to Niccolò] non sia venuto qua a consegnarglieli. Mandali alla havuta di questa, perché voglio che li habbi tutti, et se ne ha così seco alcuno, fagli portare questa sera qui a ogni modo" (*ibid.*, 94-95.)

¹²¹ See Bausi 2004.

¹²² See Verde 1973-, IV, I, 381-82. In addition to Verde's documentation scattered throughout his six volume research on the University of Florence, the most reliable description of Poliziano's courses at the Studio year by year is given by Cesarini Martinelli 1996, which partially emends the conclusions of Del Lungo 1925, 231-41 and Branca 1983, 73-90. Useful integration for the chronology of Poliziano's late philosophical courses is to be found in Wolters 1987.

perpetuo” of the Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga.¹²³ In fact, tight timing and additional--and often overlooked--evidence, may lead us to argue that Lorenzo was already envisaging a much more important role for Poliziano in the late 1470s: by appointing him for the second time as teacher to his children, notwithstanding Clarice’s protests, Lorenzo had already demonstrated how much he believed that Poliziano, at that time, represented the best in terms of literary education in Florence. Moreover, the donation of a place to work for Poliziano--who until May 1480 had lived in the Palazzo Medici in via Larga and served as secretary to Lorenzo as well--coupled with the granting of professorship, was following up another strategic provision: Poliziano’s appointment as curator of the Medicean private library, which occurred about a year before (“as I have very recently explored the entire stock of your [i.e. Lorenzo’s] most beautiful library, the care of which you conceded to me.”)¹²⁴

I believe, however, that a better explanation for Lorenzo’s seemingly contradictory behavior is found in the fact that in that summer of 1479 Lorenzo had realized the outstanding potentialities of Poliziano as a scholar, and was ready to channel them into a much larger project that I will call “Laurentian classicism.” Before this date, Lorenzo had already fostered a classicist trend in poetry, but that remained a phenomenon exclusively confined to literature in the Italian vernacular, whereas with the emergence of Poliziano on the cultural scene,

¹²³ Picotti 1955, 95-96.

¹²⁴ “Cum universam tuae pulcherrimae bibliothecae suppellectilem, quam tute nobis tuendam concessisti, nuperrime scrutarer,” quoted in Picotti 1955, 48 n. 2. Picotti quotes from the *Opera omnia* in the Basel edition (1553) that on p. 394 displays the correct reading “tuendam;” the Aldine (1498) has instead “utendam,” to be rejected as manifestly erroneous. This statement is to be found in the dedication to Lorenzo of Poliziano’s Latin translation of the *Enchiridion* [Handbook] of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, that he had completed in the previous summer.

such a trend was reoriented toward the imitation of Greek and Latin literary models. For a better understanding of the novelty and the importance of this development we must now discuss Lorenzo's and Poliziano's positions with regards to the debate between the vernacular and Latin.¹²⁵

2.2. Laurentian Classicism

From the standpoint of linguistic and literary history, the “age of Lorenzo” (ca. 1470-92) is universally regarded as a crucial moment for the ultimate establishment of the Italian vernacular, as it was already emphasized by one of Lorenzo's contemporaries, the humanist and poet Vincenzo Colli, also known as Calmeta: “la vulgare poesia e arte oratoria, dal Petrarca e Boccaccio in qua quasi adulterata, prima Laurentio Medice e suoi coetanei, poi mediante la emulatione di questa [*scil.* Beatrice d'Este] et altre singularissime donne di nostra etade, su la pristina dignitate essere ritornata se comprehende.”¹²⁶ In Florence, a consistent, although sporadic, pro-vernacular literary movement had already started in the second quarter of the fifteenth century with Leon Battista Alberti's preface to Book III of his *Della famiglia* (1437), and with his *Grammatica della lingua toscana*, the first humanistic grammar of the Tuscan dialect.¹²⁷ This movement received support from extra-literary phenomena, such as the more and more

¹²⁵ I shall do so keeping in mind Bruno Migliorini's words: “the cultural life of the Quattrocento found expression in two languages, and the history of either of them cannot be understood without reference to its relationship to the other” (Migliorini 1966, 161.)

¹²⁶ *Vita di Serafino Aquilano* (printed 1504) quoted in Migliorini 1966, 170. On Calmeta (ca. 1460-1508), see Pieri 1982. On the general question of the vernacular in the Laurentian age, see Migliorini 168-70; Tavoni 1992, 74-79; Coletti 1993, 96-97; Marazzini 1994, 217-19.

¹²⁷ See Celenza 2009. With the adjective “literary” I am here referring to all these instances in which the Italian vernacular is employed chiefly for artistic purposes.

frequent use of the vernacular in official documentation, public and private, in mercantile activity, in religious predication, and so on.¹²⁸ But it was due to Lorenzo's initiative, and that of the intellectuals in his circle, that the revival ceased to be the product of a single mind (as it was with Alberti) and became a diffuse Florentine reality. In this respect, a signature feature was the new wave of "volgarizzamenti," like Donato Acciaiuoli's version (1473) of Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*, or Landino's version of Pliny's *Natural History* (1476), and "auto-volgarizzamenti," such as Ficino's translations of his own *De amore* and *De Christiana religione*.¹²⁹

Lorenzo's awareness of the political import of the use of vernacular is overtly stressed in the "proemio" to his *Comento de' miei sonetti*.¹³⁰ In this work, the defense of the Italian vernacular is conveyed through a theory of the excellent language, which Lorenzo explains to be a language "degnà di alcuna eccellente materia e subietto" (40).¹³¹ First of all, it is "più comune," hence "più comunicabile e universale" (41). Secondly, "l'esser copiosa e abundante e atta ad esprimere bene il senso e il concetto della mente" (44). Thirdly, what makes a language dignified ("la altra condizione che più degnifica la lingua") is "dolcezza" and "armonia," both characteristics possessed by the Italian vernacular (46-47).

¹²⁸ See Paccagnella 1993, 199-209.

¹²⁹ See Bessi 1996, 23-24. For the debate between Latin and the vernacular. see Kristeller 1985; Tavoni 1992, 57-83; Marazzini 1994, 207-19.

¹³⁰ The extremely intricate composition of this work (for which see de' Medici 1992, I, 325-29), in turn complicated by the well-founded hypothesis of its three redactions, all quite distant in time (Martelli 1965), makes it almost impossible to provide precise chronology. All recent editors and commentators, nonetheless, ascribe the "proemio" to a later redactional phase, i.e. not earlier than 1484-85.

¹³¹ All the quotations are taken from the edition of Lorenzo's *opera omnia* edited by Paolo Orvieto, (the numbers in parentheses indicating the sentence, not the page.) For an English translation with facing text in Italian, see Watt Cooks 1995, which follows instead Tiziano Zanato's critical edition.

Another condition that makes a language excellent is the treatment of subtle and serious matters necessary to the human life: “quando in una lingua sono scritte cose sottili e gravi e necessarie alla vita umana” (48). Finally, Lorenzo highlights the parallel glory of a language that expands together with the fortune of the place where it is used: “resta un’altra sola condizione che dà reputazione alla lingua, e questo è quando el successo delle cose del mondo è tale che, facci universale e quasi comune a tutto il mondo quello che è naturalmente proprio di una città o d’una provincia sola” (52). This very last passage is echoed further in the text (here the original Italian is needed):

[. . .] queste che sono e che forse a qualcuno potrebbero pure parere proprie laude della lingua, mi paiono assai copiosamente nella nostra [...]. E forse saranno ancora scritte in questa lingua cose sottile e importante e degne d’essere lette; massime perché insino a ora si può dire essere l’adolescenza di questa lingua, perché ognora più si fa elegante e gentile. E potrebbe facilmente, nella iuventù e adulta età sua, venire ancora in maggiore perfezione; e tanto più aggiugnendosi qualche prospero successo e augumento al fiorentino imperio, come si debbe non solamente sperare, ma con tutto lo ingegno e forze per li buoni cittadini aiutare (66-68 *passim*).¹³²

The positions expressed in this late *proemio* can be seen as the development of a much earlier experiment with the vernacular, which goes under the name of *Raccolta aragonese*. This is an anthology of Tuscan poetry from its origins to Lorenzo, assembled by Poliziano and the Magnificent himself in 1476 and presented in 1477 to Federico d’Aragona, son of the King of Naples Ferrante

¹³² It has been pointed out that the observations that I just quoted are not to be found in Dante’s *Convivio* in the footsteps of which Lorenzo’s defense is modeled, but are the product of his own vision of language: “È un apporto del tutto originale del Magnifico, non per nulla incentrato su motivazioni storico-politiche: e il concetto, presentato qui nel suo valore generale, assoluto, sembra apposta costruito per trarne conseguenti, necessarie applicazioni al volgare (fiorentino), come infatti puntualmente avverrà nelle pagine susseguenti, che completeranno in tal modo un’affermazione probabilmente sorta dagli effettivi interessi dell’uomo di stato” (Zanato 1979, 23.)

I.¹³³ The prefatory letter that accompanied it, signed by Lorenzo but most likely authored by Poliziano, glorified the Italian vernacular, emphasizing its richness and versatility:

Né sia però nessuno che quella toscana lingua come poco ornata e copiosa disprezzi. Imperocché se bene e giustamente le sue ricchezze ed ornamenti saranno estimati, non povera questa lingua, non rozza, ma abundante e pulitissima sarà reputata. Nessuna cosa gentile, florida, leggiadra, ornata; nessuna acuta, distinta, ingegnosa, sottile; nessuna alta, magnifica, sonora; nessuna finalmente ardente, animosa, concitata si puote immaginare, della quale non pure in quelli duo primi, Dante e Petrarca, ma in questi altri ancora, i quali tu, signore, hai suscitati, infiniti e chiarissimi esempli non risplendino.¹³⁴

By presenting Ferdinando d'Aragona with the *Raccolta*, Lorenzo had a number of goals in mind. At face value, this was a gesture of friendly openness towards a potential enemy, as Ferrante was ally to Sixtus IV, at that time Florence's most tenacious adversary. It was also intended to promote the image of Florence in a court-like environment where the use of Tuscan vernacular had begun to be challenged in favor of Latin.¹³⁵ Finally, it enabled Lorenzo to challenge the monopoly of literary Tuscan vernacular that was a traditional prerogative of the anti-Medicean oligarchy from at least the times of Cosimo, Lorenzo's grandfather and generous sponsor of the revival of classical scholarship and literature.¹³⁶

¹³³ The letter can be read in *Prosatori volgari*, 985-90. The existence of an earlier redaction of the *Raccolta* has been indicated (although the date 1470 is acknowledged as merely tentative). See De Robertis 1978.

¹³⁴ *Prosatori volgari* 987. For Poliziano's authorship, see Barbi 1965, 217-326.

¹³⁵ See De Blasi and Varvaro 1992, 252-54; Tavoni 1992, 70-74.

¹³⁶ In Martelli's words, "la verità è che, fin da quest'epoca, ed anzi fin dall'alba del secolo, il volgare e la poesia vanno definendosi sempre più chiaramente come gli strumenti linguistici e culturali cari all'oligarchia antimedicea e d'essa squisitamente propri; così come, nell'ala opposta dello schieramento, il latino (ma, ben presto con Niccoli e con Traversari e con Bruni, anche il greco) e la filosofia o la teologia caratterizzano la cultura tipica del partito mediceo" (Martelli 1988, 27.) Then to add: "Si tratta, naturalmente, di una schematizzazione: che tuttavia, pur prevedendo tutte le

In concrete terms, however, for which use of Tuscan vernacular was he advocating? The *Raccolta* included such a large number of specimens of Italian poetry, we can scarcely conceive of it as a selection in the first place. Nonetheless, if we frame our answer in the genealogical discourse envisaged in the prefatory letter, we would have sufficient indications allowing us to understand the significance of this linguistic and cultural operation. The genealogy is not linear and does not follow a strictly chronological order, but is designed through lines that point inevitably to Florence. Also, it is developed according to an aesthetics that combines a suave and gracious style with substantial philosophical content, two polarities around which Lorenzo's judgment is formed. Unsurprisingly, then, Guido Cavalcanti occupies a place of pride, followed by the other great *stilnovista*, Cino da Pistoia, included with something like eighty-seven poems: an "all-delicate and truly loving" poet who was "the first to avoid the old roughness from which the divine Dante, yet *mirabilissimo*, was not able to refrain himself."¹³⁷ Dante and Petrarca, albeit acknowledged as the "two suns" of the

sfumature e tutte le eccezioni richieste da una situazione estremamente fluida, corrisponde, nella sostanza, alla realtà. Prova ne sia il fatto che ai ritorni di fiamma dell'oligarchia, si accompagnano costantemente periodi di restaurazione culturale verso gusti e modelli più ancora trecenteschi che primo-quattrocenteschi" (*ibid.* n. 7.)

¹³⁷ "Cavalcanti fiorentino, sottilissimo dialettico e filosofo del suo secolo prestantissimo. Costui per certo, come del corpo fu bello e leggiadro, come di sangue gentilissimo, così ne' suoi scritti non so che più che gli altri bello, gentile, e peregrino rassembra, e nelle invenzioni acutissimo, magnifico, ammirabile, gravissimo nelle sentenze, copioso e rilevato nell'ordine, composto, saggio e avveduto le quali tutte sue beate virtù d'un vago, dolce e peregrino stile, come di preziosa veste, sono adorne" (*Prosatori volgari*, 988.) As of Cino: "tutto delicato e veramente amoroso, il quale primo, al mio parere, cominciò l'antico rozzore in tutto a schifare, dal quale né il divino Dante, per altro mirabilissimo, s'è potuto da ogni parte schermire" (*ibid.* 989.)

Italian literary tradition, are just the immediate followers in the poetic hierarchy.¹³⁸

These theoretical positions have their practical counterpart in Lorenzo's own poetic production--some examples of which are included in the *Raccolta*--which underwent dramatic changes over the course of the 1470s. This is not the place to engage in analysis the extremely complex world of Lorenzo's poetry, but it is sufficient to note that after 1473, the peak of his relation with Marsilio Ficino, it becomes decidedly a philosophical poetry, far from the expressionistic and often popular taste typical of Luigi Pulci and his circle. As I have said above, this characterized Lorenzo's juvenile "phase," and he gradually inclined to more highly stylized models, such as the *stilnovisti*, the Dante of the *Vita nuova* and of the *Convivio*, Petrarca, Giusto de' Conti, and many others.¹³⁹ In other words, at that time Lorenzo--who, as far as we know, never wrote a line in Latin--was envisioning a sort of "vernacular classicism" modeled on literary values like grace, elegance, sweetness, gravitas, and imbued with philosophical import. This novel inspired poetry corresponded with an optimistic *Weltanschauung*, which was the expression of Lorenzo's happiest moments. Only a few years later, in the spring of 1478, this fragile world would collapse because of the Pazzi conspiracy; however, Lorenzo had nonetheless achieved the goal of subtracting the vernacular tradition from the oligarchic party. Now, the time was ripe to address his cultural policy elsewhere and Poliziano was ready to take the chance.

¹³⁸ In the striking anticanonical move of putting Dante after Cino da Pistoia in the vernacular hierarchy, it has been seen "un giudizio provocatorio, che anteponeva un gusto privato al valore nazionale e monumentale" (Tavoni 1992, 75.)

¹³⁹ On Lorenzo de' Medici's literary activity, see Bigi 1955; Martelli 1965; Zanato 1992; Orvieto 1992 and 1996.

Poliziano's attitude toward the Italian vernacular is probably more complex and articulated than Lorenzo's, and displays some traits of ambiguity that have caused much scholarly debate, a discussion made more difficult by the extremely entangled vicissitudes of the publication of Poliziano's oeuvre. It is thus necessary to summarize this debate, starting from the traditional view from the 1480s, to the turning point of Poliziano's career as a writer. According to this view, 1480 constituted for him a sort of watershed: before this date he was chiefly the author of the *Stanze*, of the *Fabula di Orfeo*, and of a good deal of his "minor" vernacular compositions, mostly *ballate* and *rispetti*; after this date, instead, we have a different Poliziano, who is a university professor and the entirety of whose efforts are concentrated in the philological enterprise.¹⁴⁰ Vittore Branca was the first to demonstrate that such a clear-cut reconstruction was groundless: "quell'opposizione--o almeno divisione o successione--fra Poliziano volgare e Poliziano latino, fra Poliziano poeta e poliziano filologo, è dunque da relegare nel mondo delle favole e degli *eidòla* critici." At the same time, Branca himself cannot but acknowledge that a certain change has occurred:

Still, after the years 1479-1480 Poliziano matured a new orientation, as it became apparent in him and his works. It is not a change in terms of scholarly engagement and quantity of output (he is more professor than "familiaris" of the Medicean household, more inclined to Latin than to vernacular in his writings, more champion of learning than celebrator of love and common events). He goes through an interior and intellectual upheaval, a change reflected in his literary activity. An

¹⁴⁰ We could say, with Branca: "Non occorre fare riferimenti precisi, quando queste prospettive contrastanti si aprono anche nelle più autorevoli e ampie storie letterarie o trattazioni del Quattrocento e del Rinascimento fiorentino" (Branca 1983, 26 n. 1.)

upheaval such that the Medicean contingency and the biographical vicissitudes cannot fully justify and explain.¹⁴¹

In more recent years other scholars have partly resumed the traditional tenet, and have detected that “new orientation” of which Branca speaks in what we might call a trajectory in Poliziano’s literary production, a trajectory indicating a progressive decrease in the use of vernacular in favor of Latin starting in the late 1470s.¹⁴² Mario Martelli, who is an exponent of this “revised” traditional view has written:

[. . .] if, as far as we know, after 1480 Poliziano does not write in the vernacular anymore, this is not to be connected with a change in his inspiration, *but with a change of the political and cultural climate*. In the 1470s, with regard to the cultural policy he has envisaged, Lorenzo’s most pressing problem is that of the Italian vernacular: a banner to snatch out of the hands of the anti-Medicean oligarchy and to be appropriated in the only way possible, that is by giving it a new shape and so securing it a new glory [. . .] In the years between 1473 and 1478 Poliziano actively as well as cleverly contributes to that political and cultural operation. [My emphasis].¹⁴³

It might not be entirely accurate to say that Poliziano “did not write in vernacular anymore,” as it may well be possible that some--but, very few--of his *Rime* were composed during the 1480s.¹⁴⁴ Also, the hypothesis that Poliziano revised the

¹⁴¹ Branca 1983, 12, followed, among others, by Delcorno Branca 1990, 11-12, and Bettinzoli 1994, 610-11.

¹⁴² Martelli 1995, 38-54. But see also Cesarini Martinelli 1978, 98-99, and 2003, 220; Bausi 1997, v-vii. All these scholars, nonetheless, argue for a “unitary” reading of Poliziano’s literary activity. The view that Poliziano abandoned the poetic vein in favor of the prosastic one is instead to be fully rejected. It will suffice to mention the fact that of the works to which he meant to entrust his fame are four long *poemetti* in Latin verses, the *Silvae*, composed throughout the 1480s and part of the 1490s.

¹⁴³ Martelli 1995, 41-43 *passim*.

¹⁴⁴ See Delcorno Branca 1990, 14 (*contra* Martelli 1995, 45-48.) “Tuttavia due osservazioni si impongono: in primo luogo non esistono, per nessuna delle *Rime*, prove certe che ci inducano a collocare la loro composizione nella seconda fase [i.e. after 1480] dell’attività poliziana; e inoltre, cosa ben più importante, le caratteristiche culturali e stilistiche di questi componimenti sembrano rinviare con chiarezza, nella maggior parte dei casi, agli anni Settanta, ossia a quell’epoca della cultura laurenziana contrassegnata,

text of the *Stanze* over an extended period of time, well into the 1480s, has been advanced with some good arguments.¹⁴⁵ Having said that, we must highlight the fact that Poliziano's major vernacular works all fall before 1478. Indeed, the *Stanze per la giostra*--which he neither completed, nor personally published--cannot be dated after April 26, 1478, when Giuliano de' Medici, to whom the work is dedicated, was murdered in Santa Maria del Fiore in the Pazzi conspiracy.¹⁴⁶ As for the *Orfeo*, according to the one of most accredited, but still dubious chronologies, it was certainly composed before October 21, 1483--the date of the death of its dedicatee, Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga--and very likely in the 1470s before the Pazzi conspiracy.¹⁴⁷ Other scholars prefer to indicate 1480 as the most probable date, when Poliziano was residing by Gonzaga.¹⁴⁸

Here I would like to approach the whole issue from a different standpoint, by arguing that more light can be shed on it if we consider Poliziano's self-fashioning as classicist poet and scholar, a tendency that became more and more apparent throughout the 1480s, a fact that scholarship often tends to downplay. The aforementioned vicissitudes of the publication of his works in print will make

da un lato, dal predominio del neoplatonismo di Marsilio Ficino, e, dall'altro, dall'elaborazione di una lingua poetica «regolata», scevra di elementi municipali, e formata direttamente, oltre che sul modello latino, sui nobili esempi degli stilnovisti, del Dante delle *Rime*, del Petrarca" (Bausi 1997, vi-vii.)

¹⁴⁵ See Gorni 1975 and 1986 (*contra* Martelli 1985; 1992b.)

¹⁴⁶ Although empirically determined, this *terminus ante quem* can be considered certain and it is widely accepted by the majority of the editors of the *Stanze* (Martelli 1985; 1992b; Carrai 1988b; Bausi 2006.) For a dissenting opinion, see Gorni's works cited in the previous footnote.

¹⁴⁷ This is because during the conspiracy Cardinal Gonzaga was on the Pazzi's side and it is impossible to envisage Poliziano openly celebrating an opponent of Lorenzo and Florence in those convulse years. See Tisconi Benvenuti 2000, 58-72 and Martelli 1995, 80-81.

¹⁴⁸ See Picotti 1955, 102-05; Maier 1969, 387-90. Branca 1983, 61 and 70 n. 17; Chambers 1992, 70-71. As for the other editors, Puccini 1992, li-liii, seems more inclined to accept Picotti's proposal.

my case more clear. By August 1494, a few weeks before his death, Poliziano had not put to print any of his vernacular works. It was in fact his friend Alessandro Sarti who promoted his printed publication (by the printer de' Benedetti in Bologna) of the *Cose vulgare*, an edition containing the *Stanze*, the *Orfeo*, and two poems entitled respectively *Che fai tu Ecco* and *Non potrà mai dire amore*. From Sarti's dedication letter to Antonio Galeazzo Bentivoglio, archdeacon of Bologna, we can infer that Poliziano was not aware that these works were being published, and as a matter of fact Sarti himself assumed that their author was not going to be pleased about this initiative: "If, on the one hand, I believe that if Poliziano is quite displeased that these *stanze*, that he despised, are hereby printed, on the other hand he will be delighted that once that they are divulged they are so under your name and under your *Signoria*."¹⁴⁹ As for Poliziano's works in the classical languages, the situation is exactly the opposite, as we have detailed records of all the printed editions that were purposefully realized along with documentation for those that remained just projects on paper.¹⁵⁰ We know of his projects about collections of both the Greek epigrams and the Latin ones, but we have no trace whatsoever of Poliziano's intention of publishing vernacular

¹⁴⁹ See Pernicone 1954, xxvii; Perosa 1954, 6-7. For a contrary opinion, see Branca who believes that Poliziano's supposed rejection of this publication is only a rhetorical move of false modesty (Branca 1983, 7-8). Sarti is an interesting and debated figure (see Hill Cotton 1964; Delcorno Branca 1979, 22-25): Poliziano, to whom he sent a copy of the *Miscellanea* in 1489 but with whom he personally met in Bologna only in 1491, during his trip with Giovanni Pico in the North of Italy (Branca 1983, 136), trusted him very much (see also *Ep.* IV, 13: "a man of literary learning, devoted to me and, most importantly in my opinion, never the least bit sluggish in taking care of something for a friend" [literatum hominem, nostrique studiosum, tum (quod ego in hac re primum puto) neutiquam in amici negocio dormitantem])(Butler 2006, 286-7.) Scholars seem to be much more cautious in assessing his merits with regard to Poliziano's legacy, as it has been demonstrated that he heavily manipulated the latter's extant manuscripts (see Dorez 1896 and 1898; Martelli 1995, 255-265.)

¹⁵⁰ A detailed list of the former in Perosa 1954, 5-6.

works.¹⁵¹ A similar attitude is confirmed by Poliziano's *Libro delle epistole* that, although ready in May 1494, was put to print only posthumously by Aldo Manuzio on initiative of Pietro Crinito and Alessandro Sarti in 1498.¹⁵² All the letters in this collection are in Latin, as in Latin are those that were printed individually.¹⁵³

In my opinion, what needs to be emphasized in the issue between Latin and the Italian vernacular is that since the days of the Latin version of the *Iliad* (1469-1475,) Poliziano was perfectly aware that it was the mastery of Greek and Latin letters that made his achievements remarkable and his intellectual persona outstanding. Also, when as a young man his unleashed ambition urged him to find the favors of the Florentine intellectual circles, he did so as classicist poet, as was in 1473 when he composed his two most remarkable juvenile works, the elaborate Latin elegies *ad Bartholomaeum Fontium*--dedicated to a prominent humanist at the Studio--and *Albieram*, which commemorated the premature death of a young girl of the Medicean circle. Finally, when he fought for acknowledgement, and he did so fiercely, it was always because he felt attacked as classicist, not as a vernacular poet. Furthermore, his truly admired intellectual model, although overtly and publicly despised, was a classical scholar, the Veronese Domizio Calderini.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See, respectively, the *Ep.* V, 7 to the Bolognese humanist Antonio Urceo Codro--dated around the end of June and the beginning of July 1494--and the *Ep.* VII, 14, to an Antonio Zeno, a Venetian friend, dated shortly thereafter.

¹⁵² See Del Lungo 1867, 85; Martelli 1995, 205-65.

¹⁵³ Listed in Perosa 1954, 6 n. 17. It is possible that these epistles were printed unbeknownst to Poliziano.

¹⁵⁴ See Dionisotti 1968; Campanelli 2001, 4-10 with literature. An important portrait of Calderini is in Poliziano's *Misc.* I, 9.

It should be clear, at this point, that the debate between the Italian vernacular and Latin, with regards to Poliziano, cannot be framed in the sense of an ultimate opposition, but rather as a crucial component of self-fashioning instances that were captivated and exploited by Lorenzo for cultural and political purposes. As we have seen, in 1480, after having defeated the Pazzi and their allies, the promotion of the Italian vernacular as a means of countering the Florentine oligarchy, made little or no sense. Now, the cultural battle which was waged against the other Italian main cultural centers had to be won on the ground of classical scholarship. Classical philology was the avantgarde: new methodology of textual criticism and new interests had been developed in Rome by Pomponio Leto and his *Accademia* and by Calderini, and even before with Lorenzo Valla, on whose exemplary doctrine Neapolitan circles were still thriving. Moreover, Filippo Beroaldo the Elder in Bologna, Giorgio Merula in Venice and then in Milan, and quite a few other humanists were engaged at various levels in the study and edition of ancient texts.¹⁵⁵ Florence, in this respect, was at the bottom of the barrel.

2.3. Philologia Municipalis

We have seen how lavishly Lorenzo provided for Poliziano to make up for this cultural delay. On his part, Poliziano amply fulfilled Lorenzo's expectations. In a bit more than a decade, he lectured on canonical and less canonical Greek and Latin authors, including poets, historians, or philosophers; he produced commentaries and editions, culminating in the first *Miscellanea*, a collection of

¹⁵⁵ An important overview is in Fera 1990.

one hundred essays addressing specific philological issues. There seemed to be no Greek and Latin author that escaped Poliziano's sharp eye. Poliziano's scholarly achievements obtained him prestige as well as enemies, as documented by the increasing number of quarrels in which he was involved, some of which lasted well beyond his death.¹⁵⁶ In 1491, he publicly denounced rumors spread among his detractors: "I see, since I haven't previously approached this part of philosophy before now, that I must answer the silent thoughts of those who ask me by chance who my master was, daring as I do to profess myself learned in dialectic."¹⁵⁷ It was only the year after that he decided to intervene more actively and diffusely by composing the *Lamia*.

From the very title, this unique work displays its originality, which alludes to a monstrous creature similar to a vampire, greedy and envious, under which Poliziano disguises his malevolent critics.¹⁵⁸ The date and the occasion of the composition of the *Lamia* provide important elements to understand it in context. The year 1492 had been a year like none before, since Lorenzo, patron of the *Studio* as well as Poliziano, died in April. For the first time, Poliziano was confronting the Florentine audience without his protector's backing, and was now ready to attack his opponents before they could do the same to him.¹⁵⁹ The composition dates to the beginning of the academic year, when the professors at the Florentine *Studio* delivered their inaugural speech, or *praelectio*. The *Lamia*

¹⁵⁶ See Fera 1998, 333-59; Orvieto 2009, 127-40.

¹⁵⁷ "Respondendum mihi tacitis quorundam cogitationibus video qui, quoniam ante hoc tempus partem hanc philosophiae nunquam attigerim, quaerent ex me fortassis quo tandem magistro usu dialecticae me doctorem profiteri audeam [. . .]." (*Op.* 529.)

¹⁵⁸ See *Lamia* 195 n. 5 and Wesseling 1984, 22-23. From here onward, I will develop arguments that I partially anticipated in Caruso 2010.

¹⁵⁹ See Cesarini Martinelli 1996, 481.

belongs in this literary genre. An oration of this kind, which referred to the subject matter of the incoming courses (that year Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*) and contained an *exhortatio* to the studies, was formally directed at the "youth avid to learn." At the same time, its delivery also constituted the cultural highlight of academic life, since it saw the participation of the faculty from other schools, as well as of the general, well-educated public.¹⁶⁰ The academic setting is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance in understanding the meaning of the prolusion: if, indeed, the *Lamia* is the first of all a work on the meaning of philosophy and on the role of the philosopher in late Quattrocento Florence, I argue that it is the place where Poliziano began to fashion its new, "post-Laurentian" identity, that of the "grammaticus."¹⁶¹

In the "fabula" that introduces the *praelectio*, Poliziano, after having portrayed the Lamias, described how these nosey creatures put him to a sort of improvised trial:

When I was walking around, by chance one day a number of these Lamias saw me. They surrounded me, and, as if they were evaluating me, they looked me over, just like buyers are accustomed to do. Soon, with their heads bowed crookedly, they hissed althogether, 'It's Poliziano, the very one, that trifler who was so quick to call himself a philosopher.'¹⁶²

In Poliziano's reconstruction, the Lamias' accusations do not discuss the merit of the philosophy he is allegedly professing; rather, they call in question its

¹⁶⁰ On *praelectiones* see Campanelli 1994 and the examples offered in Müllner 1899.

¹⁶¹ See Celenza 2010b.

¹⁶² "Harum [*scil.* Lamiarum] igitur aliquot praetereuntem forte conspicatae me substiterunt et, quasi noscitarent, inspexere curiosius, veluti emptores solent. Mox ita inter se detortis nutibus consussurrarunt: 'Politianus est, ipsissimus est, nugator ille scilicet qui sic repente philosophus prodiit'" (*Lamia* § 6.) The quotations are given by paragraph, according to Celenza's edition, preceded by the symbol "§." In all the other cases, the numbers will refer to the page with the comment.

legitimacy, because in their view he would not have had the title to philosophize, a title that, on the other hand, he refuses:

Then [i.e. after he would explain what is a philosopher] you will easily understand that I am not a philosopher. And yet I am not saying this because I believe *you* believe it, but so that no one ever might happen to believe it. Not that I am ashamed of the *name* ‘philosopher’ (if only I could live up to it in reality!); it’s more that it keeps me happy if I stay away from *titles that belong to other people*.

This point is reasserted in other passages of the oration:

“I don’t take on the *title* of philosopher as if no one were using it now, and I don’t appropriate it (since it does belong to others), just because I comment on philosophers”; “Who then would legitimately blame me if I should take on this job of interpreting these most difficult things but leave the *title* ‘philosopher’ to others?”; “I don’t fear the envy and possible slander that might come with the *name*, or at least not so much that I wouldn’t want to be a philosopher, were it allowed.”¹⁶³

Poliziano’s defensive line is grounded on the rejection of a title that he believes does not belong to him, and on embracing and opposing another one, that of “grammaticus” (i.e. philologist):

I ask you, do you really think me so arrogant or thick skulled that, if someone were to greet me as a juriconsult or doctor I would not believe, then and there, that he was having a laugh at my expense? Still, for some time now I have brought forth commentaries (and I’d like this to be viewed without any arrogance at all) on the authors of both civil law and

¹⁶³ “Tum, spero, facile intellegitis non esse me philosophum. Neque hoc dico tamen quo id vos credam credere, sed ne quis fortasse aliquando credat; non quia me nominis istius pudeat (si modo ei possim re ipsa satisfacere), sed quo alienis titulis libenter abstineo” (*Lamia* § 7); “non scilicet philosophi nomen occupo ut caducum, non arrogo ut alienum propterea quod philosophos enarro” (*ibid.* § 73); “quis mihi igitur iure succenseat, si laborem hunc interpretandi difficillima quaeque sumpsero, nomen vero aliis philosophi reliquero?” (*ibid.* § 79); “Non enim tam metuo invidiam crimenque nominis huius ut esse philosophus nolim, si liceat” (*ibid.* § 67.) All emphasis is mine but the first (“you”). It is worth noting the recurring legal terminology (“caducum,” “iure,” “occupare” and “relinquere nomen,” “crimen”), as if Poliziano were articulating the accusation and the defense in a trial, highlighting, respectively, what pertains to a judgment of legitimacy and what does to one of merit. On Poliziano’s interest for the law, see Buonamici 1987; Ascheri 1998, with literature;.

medicine, and I have done so at the cost of quite a bit of sleep. On this account I lay claim to no other name than that of philologist.

He then goes on to illustrate the task of the philologist: “The functions of philologists are such that they examine and explain in detail every category of writers--poets, historians, orators, philosophers, medical doctors, and juriconsults.”¹⁶⁴ This passage constitutes the core of the *Lamia*, but also the core of what we have been discussing in the present chapter: this is the moment in which Poliziano defines his own identity, an identity in turn defined by the study of the classics. As a matter of fact, with such a definition, he tries to legitimize the exercise of philology that he had been practicing since his days as *Wunderkind*, and also at present himself with a new professional self-awareness. Moreover, by providing it with a title, he designated a figure, the philologist, who so far did not have a *principium individuationis*, and whose task was generally confused with that of the teachers in the arts, or just mistaken for amateurs.

Terminologically, before Poliziano the study of the classical tradition was one of many activities performed by intellectuals in a relation of *sodalitas* or gathered in “academies,” a term that as late as the 1480s indicated, in the Platonic fashion, a group of learned men, an extra-scholastic “*conversazione*.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, in those rare instances in which he was a curricular activity in schools,

¹⁶⁴ “Rogo vos, adeo esse me insolentem putatis aut stolidum ut, si quis iurisconsultum me salutet aut medicum, non me ab eo derideri prorsus credam? Commentarios tamen iamdiu (quod sine arrogantia dictum videri velim) simul in ipsum civile, simul in medicinae auctores parturio et quidem multis vigiliis, nec aliud inde mihi nomen postulo quam grammatici. (*Lamia* § 73); “grammaticorum enim sunt partes, ut omne scriptorum genus, poetas, historicos, oratores, philosophos, medicos, iureconsultos, excutiant atque enarrent” (ivi, § 71.) On the “grammaticus,” see Scaglione 1961; Mariani Zini 1999.

¹⁶⁵ See Hankins 2003, I, 222-26; Bianca 2008, 29-34; Celenza 2010a; On the humanistic *soliditates*, see De Caprio 1982.

if we exclude the exceptional case of Vittorino da Feltre's or Guarino Veronese's schools, the teachers involved in that activity enjoyed rather modest prestige and salary, especially in comparison with those who taught law or medicine. Florence was no exception. Things started to change at the beginning of the 1470s, the time of the last great crisis among the many that had affected this relatively recent and historically troubled institution.¹⁶⁶ On that occasion, through a series of measures bearing on the teaching of the arts and on those who taught them, whose ranks included Poliziano, Lorenzo progressively took control of the *Studio*.¹⁶⁷ In some regards, these measures only hastened processes that were already underway, like the gradual overtaking of the teaching of the arts in comparison to those of law and medicine, so that between 1470 and 1473 there was no course offered *in utroque iure*. Nearly contemporaneously, the difference in salary between those teaching the arts and those teaching law and medicine progressively decreased. Moreover, as testimony that these phenomena were not random but were somehow inspired by a policy in favor of what we now call the "Humanities," there was a provision by the Florence Commune (1470) according to which in regards to corresponding salaries for the professors of the *Studio*, priority was to be given to those who taught "le latine lettere, perché tale spese è utile e molto honorevole alla vostra città."¹⁶⁸ Finally, in 1473, the transfer to Pisa of the *Studium generale*, with the only exception being the teachings of "grammatica e retorica," which were instead kept in Florence, made

¹⁶⁶ See Verde 1973-; Brucker 1981; Davies 1998, with literature.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 125-42.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted *ibid.* 35 n. 171 (I slightly modified the orthography.)

unequivocally apparent the importance that the Magnificent attributed to the latter in shaping that cultural policy discussed above.¹⁶⁹

This is also why Lorenzo's death, which occurred in April 1492, came as such a powerful blow. This change of perspective is already hinted at in a letter sent by Demetrius Chalcondyles to Marcello Virgilio Adriani in June 1492.¹⁷⁰ There, the two correspondents malign the difficult situation in which Poliziano found himself. Chalcondyles, his former teacher, scornfully comments on the decline of Poliziano's star:

Pulcianus [. . .], (and you rightly call him with this name), besides the many Greek and Latin books that this year, as you write, he ran through in teaching poetry, rhetoric, dialectic, and philosophy, has recently began from my basics, as you say, [and] promises great and unheard of things. I do not know what he is up to--he who, from a very high position, and with the hope of being in charge of much more important business that is not completely unrelated with the constitution of the state, came down to the literary profession.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ On the relocation to Pisa, see Davies 1995, 72-75, 132-35.

¹⁷⁰ Demetrius Chalcondyles (1423-1511), a Byzantine émigré scholar, came to Italy in 1449. Poliziano both invoked and then celebrated in some of his Greek epigrams Chalcondyles's call to teach Greek in Florence in 1475, but their relationship soon deteriorated. Chalcondyles prepared the first editions of Homer (1488) and Isocrates (1493). On him, see Cammelli 1954. Marcello Virgilio Adriani (1454-1521) was a former student and then successor of Poliziano at the *Studio*. He served in the Florentine Chancery where he was Machiavelli's superior, and where he contributed to the latter's banishment. See Godman 1998, esp. chapter IV.

¹⁷¹ Ψυλλανvus [. . .] (nam recte tali nomine eum vocatis), praeter ea volumina tam Graeca quam Latina, quae hoc anno scribis percurrisses in facultate poetica, oratoria, dialectica, et philosophiae cepisses etiam nuper ab elementis nostris (ut ais) "magnaue et inaudita" polliceri. Per hec ominari sibi nescio quid mihi videtur, qui ex tam alto gradu ac spe multo maiora administrandi, quae προσ συστασιν της πολιτειας ουχ ηχιστα τεινει, ad licterariam professionem descenderit." This letter, originally published by Légrand in 1892, has been partially republished and more persuasively interpreted by Hunt (Hunt 1998) and Godman (Godman 1998, 28 n. 98.) I quote from Godman's edition but I have changed his reading "Psullanthropos" (as already in Légrand) in "Psullanus," as suggested by Hunt (who, oddly, maintains "Psullanthropos" in his edition.) My reading is based on the fact that in the original manuscript we have indeed "Psullanus" partly written in the Greek alphabet ("psullan") but with a Latin nominative ending ("–us.") Since "Psulla" means "flea" in Greek and translates as "pulex" in Latin, the whole compound nickname would eventually read "Pulcianus." The clear reference is to "Mons Pulcianus," Poliziano's place of birth. My reading does not diminish the derogatory value

This very last statement allows at least two interpretations: according to the first, “literaria professio” is a modest occupation; according to the second, instead, it has a more neutral meaning, and its negative connotation in the letter would be such only *ex comparatione*, that is with regard to what Chalcondyles refers to with “multo maiora administranda.”

Such comments take us back to the *Lamia*, in a passage where Poliziano affirms that the name “grammaticus” is held in little or no account: “I ask that no one envy me this name, which the half-educated scorn, as if it were something base and dirty.”¹⁷² This statement hinted at a feeling that Poliziano had been harboring for some time, as testified by a thankful brief to the Duke of Milan, Ludovico: “since you favor the truth and avenge from injustice the professor of letter, you take care not so much of my glory as of yours.”¹⁷³ In the *Lamia*, according to the rhetoric of *recusatio*, that same statement works as a form of self-deprecation that prepares the field for the counterattack against those who accused him of philosophizing without legitimacy, via the a re-semanticization of the term “grammaticus” (§§ 70-3):

Our age, knowing little about antiquity, has fenced the philologist in, within an exceedingly small circle. But among the ancients, once, this class [*ordo*] of men had so much authority that *philologists alone were the censors and critics of all writers* [my emphasis]. It was on this account that philologists were called “critics,” so that (and this is what Quintilian says) “they allowed themselves the liberty not only of annotating verses with a censorious mark in the text, but also of removing as non-canonical

(“Pulcianus” as “man with fleas”) as in Hunt’s interpretation. “The ‘free’ use of the Greek genitive--*philosophie*--in the sentence betrays Chalcondyles’ origins” (Godman 1998, 28 n. 98.)

¹⁷² “Hanc mihi, rogo, appellationem [*scil. grammatici*] nemo invidet, quam semidocti quoque aspernantur ceu vilem nimis et sordidam” (*Lamia* § 73.)

¹⁷³ “Non tam meae gloriae consulis, quam tuae, quod et veritati suffragaris et literarum professorem vindicas ab iniuria” (*Ep.* XI,22 [*Op.* 162].) The letter is to be dated in the early 1490s.

books which appeared to be falsely written, as if they were illegitimate members of the family. Indeed they even allowed themselves to categorize those authors that they deemed worthy or even to remove some all together.”¹⁷⁴

Here again, vocabulary is crucial to understand Poliziano’s operation. By drawing from the legal terminology, he maintains the frame of the *Lamia* as that of a trial in which he overthrows the accusations and proclaims himself judge, reversing the position of the accusers and prosecutors have with inditees. In Poliziano’s view, indeed, there is no literary genre or discipline whose textuality can escape the philologist’s judgment, and it had always been so (“apud antiquos,”) as Quintilian authoritatively attests. Thus, if a title were usurped, it is the self-professed philosophers (i.e. the Lamias) who have invaded the philologist’s field. This notion of trespassing is evident when he draws careful distinctions with regard to roles and models in the teaching of literature:

[. . .] for “grammatikos” (philologist) in Greek means nothing other than “litteratus” in Latin. Yet we have degraded this name by using it in the grammar school, as if we were using it in a lowly bakery. And so philologists, or *litterati*, could now legitimately bewail and become distressed by that name, in the same way that Antigenides, that flautist, became distressed. He could not bear with equanimity the fact that funeral horn-players were also called “flautists.” *Litterati*, or philologists, can take offense at the fact that at the present moment even those who teach elementary grammar are called “grammatici.” Indeed, among the Greeks, members of this category were called, not “grammatici,” but

¹⁷⁴ “Nostra aetas, parum perita rerum veterum, nimis brevi gyro grammaticum sepsit. At apud antiquos olim tantum auctoritatis hic ordo habuit ut censores essent et iudices scriptorum omnium soli grammatici, quos ob id etiam criticos vocabant, sic ut non versus modo (ita enim Quintilianus ait) “censoria quadam virgula notare, sed libros etiam qui falso viderentur inscripti tanquam subditicios submovere familia permiserint sibi, quin auctores etiam quos vellent aut in ordinem redigerent aut omnino eximerent numero” (*Lamia* § 71.) The passage from Quintilian is *Inst. or.* 1.4.2-3. On Poliziano’s study of Quintilian, see the introduction to Daneloni 2001.

“grammatistae,” even as, among the Latins, they were not called “litterati” but “litteratores.”¹⁷⁵

It is apparent that the “grammaticus” (or “litteratus,” or “philologist”) occupies the highest place in the hierarchy. On these premises, Poliziano has a much easier time in deconstructing the charge of teaching philosophy without being a philosopher. Indeed, by affirming that the philologist’s field of action does not have an institutional or a disciplinary nature, but a textual one; by claiming an absolute command on such a textuality--as we have seen above in the citation from Quintilian--Poliziano refutes the core of the Lamias’s allegations. For him, abstaining from studying a certain text just because it belongs in a different field than the one to which he was appointed to teach (rhetoric and poetics, that is) would be inconceivable. As far as a lesson is taught via a text, it falls in the “grammaticus” domain.

2.4. Ordo Grammaticorum

In the discursive strategies that we have seen at work in the *Lamia*, besides the defense of the literary scholar, we can detect the birth of a new identity that Poliziano is self-fashioning. This can be inferred from a series of hints that point to the formation of an early-modern professional self-awareness, which, with regards to the field of literature, has attracted scholarly attention

¹⁷⁵ “Nec enim aliud grammaticus Graece quam Latine litteratus. Nos autem nomen hoc in ludum triviale detrusimus tanquam in pistrinum. Itaque iure conqueri nunc litterati possent et animo angere quo nomine Antigenides ille tibicenangebatur. Ferebat Antigenides parum aeque animo quod monumentarii ceraulae tibicines dicerentur. Indignari litterati possunt quod grammatici nunc appellentur etiam qui prima doceant elementa. Ceterum apud Graecos hoc genus non “grammatici” sed “grammatistae,” non “litterati” apud Latinos sed “litteratores” vocabantur” (*Lamia* § 72.) The reference to Antigenides is to be found in Apul. *Flor.* 4.1-2.

only very recently.¹⁷⁶ Building on Andrew Abbot's pioneering study on the system of professions, Douglas Biow has pointed out some of the fundamental traits that can be recognized at the appearance of a new profession:

According to Abbott, professions, which are constantly in a formative state, are historically determined activities that form at any given time an interconnected system. Within these systems, professions are continually disputing jurisdictions, which Abbott defines as a profession's claim to control--partially or completely--certain forms of work. As professions evolve and compete among themselves, they may gradually relinquish one or another jurisdictional claim. In particular, this relinquishment occurs when a certain form of work has become increasingly routine. [. . .] Moreover, a profession's ability both to seize and to enforce its jurisdictional claim is [. . .] directly related to the strength of its appeal to a body of abstract knowledge and its perceived applicability. That specialized knowledge--which is often but not always academic--must be adaptable to cultural shifts; flexible enough to embrace new forms of technical and intellectual advances; and held in high prestige, both within the system of professions and, significantly, by the interested public at large. The competition among professions within a system is thus often acted out in the public arena, for a profession cannot simply claim jurisdictional control over a form of work if the public does not legitimize that claim by confirming its confidence to a particular profession's body of abstract knowledge as both appropriate and useful.¹⁷⁷

To be sure, Abbott's theory is highly formalized and is founded on the observation of an industrial society where the division of labor is a well-established reality. Nonetheless, several of the traits that he describes, which Biow summarizes, are suitable to Poliziano's experience. We have just seen, for instance, how in the *Lamia* he handled and solved the conflict of "jurisdiction" by appealing to an absolute claim to textuality (however grounded on a principle of authority: Quintilian instead of Aristotle.) Also, there is hardly a more "adaptable to cultural shifts" and "flexible" knowledge than the command of textuality, as the

¹⁷⁶ See Biow 2002, 11 n. 26.

¹⁷⁷ Biow 2002, 12-13; see also Abbott 1988.

latter's formal nature makes it suitable to any content, and as is apparent in the reference to "medical doctors" and "jurisconsults" in the definition of the task of the "grammaticus." Finally, with regard to the task of pursuing "prestige" and attracting the "interest" of the "public at large," this is precisely what Poliziano is trying to do in the *Lamia* by seizing the solemn occasion of the *praelectio* to voice his contempt for his own adversaries and to illustrate the task of his own activity (with the obvious caveat that Abbot's "public at large" it is not a viable category to be employed in describing an academic event in the late Quattrocento.) The addressed public is that of the *homines docti* and it is their appreciation for which Poliziano strives; an appreciation, we shall see shortly, not relegated to the immediate circle of intellectuals in Florence, but also outside its walls.¹⁷⁸

The import of Poliziano's positions expressed in the *Lamia* goes well beyond the contingency of common polemic between scholars. The intellectual competitiveness of this oration is best understood, I believe, as making up for the ultimate disintegration of the Medicean cultural policy that occurred with the death of Lorenzo. Such a policy, relaunched as Laurentian classicism in the early 1480s, grounded on solid Latin foundations and informed by an unparalleled knowledge of Greek, found in Poliziano its prophet and the *Miscellanea centuria prima* its sacred text. It was now time, he must have sensed, to extend, or perhaps reorient, that project by summoning allies--other "grammatici" on an "international level." Classicism, an extra-local phenomenon by definition, perfectly suited that design.

¹⁷⁸ See Celenza 2009.

In this light we must now read Poliziano's letter exchange with Filippo Beroaldo the Elder in the early 1490s. Beroaldo was a highly-reputed scholar in the university of Bologna, a far more prestigious institution than the Florentine *Studio*. Poliziano and Beroaldo personally met only in few occasions (in Florence in 1486 and in Bologna in 1491, where the former had the chance to attend classes taught by the latter), and their relationship was mainly cordial and comprised of mutual esteem; it never ended up in that *odium philologorum* to which Poliziano was extremely inclined. Some letters in the Poliziano's *Liber epistularum* testify to this state of things.¹⁷⁹ In *Ep.* VI, 6, dated April 1, 1494, Poliziano wrote to Beroaldo to inform him that in Bologna someone had been trying to sell some notes of comment to Statius's *Silvae*, passing them off as Poliziano's. What interests us here is the reason he turned to Beroaldo: "I wanted above all to write to you so as to have a much more authoritative witness, especially because these [*scil.* notes] started circulating first in Bologna, city in which you have been holding, already for a long time, and rightly so, the highest rank among the *professors of our class*" [my emphasis].¹⁸⁰ Paola de Capua, who first attracted attention to this passage, has written: "From this and from other letters of the Florentine humanist it clearly appears that he saw the professors organized in an "ordo", almost a caste, each of them dislocated according to an ideal geography made up by the various academic centers: Filippo Beroaldo in

¹⁷⁹ For the position of the Poliziano-Beroaldo letter exchange in the *Liber*, see Martelli 1995, 251-55.

¹⁸⁰ "Scribere autem ad te potissimum libuit, ut maior in teste foret auctoritas, praesertim quoniam vulgari ista primum Bononiae coepta sunt, qua tu in civitate iure diu principem locum tenes inter nostri ordinis professores" (*Ep.* VI, 1 [*Op.* 73].)

Bologna, Francesco Pucci in Naples [...], Battista Guarini in Ferrara [...] and Poliziano himself in Florence.”¹⁸¹

This observation deserves to be expounded upon. It should be read, I argue, in connection with the passage of the *Lamia* quoted above when Poliziano, defining the “grammaticus” after Quintilian, spoke of a “class” of scholars who, being the supreme judges of textuality, were in charge of fashioning the canon of literature. Indeed, “class” is the English for “ordo,” which Poliziano uses in its paraphrase of Quintilian’s passage, but which is not found in the passage itself. As a matter of fact, in Quintilian’s whole corpus, the word “ordo” appears exclusively with the common meaning of “order” or “succession,” and not that of “class” or “caste.” It is only in Medieval Latin that the sociological meaning of “ordo” is emphasized, certainly to be connected to the emergence of the monastic and chivalric orders.¹⁸² Yet we are far from a semantic shift, since the original meaning is by no means relinquished, as demonstrated by the frequent occurrences use of “ordo” in the first traditional meaning.¹⁸³ If it seems safe, therefore, to assume that Poliziano was envisioning the creation of an élite cadre of scholars, a look at Poliziano’s *Liber epistularum*--a collection of letters assembled in twelve books--could help reconstruct the intellectuals who, in

¹⁸¹ De Capua 1998, 505 n. 1. Poliziano calls both “professores”: Pucci, for a long time based in Naples, was a former pupil of his, whereas Guarini, son to the famous Guarino Veronese, was professor in Ferrara. See, respectively, Santoro 1948 e Piacente 1995.

¹⁸² Some suggestions in this direction in Suitner 2010, 95-111. I would like to thank Chris Celenza who brought it to my attention. See also Forcellini, *ad voc.*

¹⁸³ To mention but one example from Poliziano’s cultural milieu, see Ficino’s treatment of beauty in the “Speech IV” of his commentary on Plato’s *Symposium* (Jayne 1985, 71-82.)

Poliziano's mind, took part, or had to take part, in such a project and their eventual contribution.

The publication of the *Liber* was announced to Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici on May 23, 1494, but it was actually released only posthumously in 1498 by two of Poliziano's closest *familiares*, Pietro Crinito and Alessandro Sarti, who heavily manipulated the work's original structure.¹⁸⁴ The *Liber epistolarum* constituted a widely orchestrated operation of "self-invention," aimed at supporting Piero's fragile diplomatic relations--a point egregiously illustrated by Mario Martelli--as well as Poliziano's own position, which I will discuss in what follows.¹⁸⁵ The *Liber*'s instrumental nature is betrayed not only by its content--many letter collections are just mutual praises among humanists, leaving the modern reader with the impression of nothing actually being said--but also by its very structural features. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the majority of the letters can be ascribed to the very last years of 1480s and especially to the early 1490s, the moment when the necessity of good publicity was more pressing, in this respect being very close to the agenda of the *Lamia* and to the *de facto* situation that has prompted it: Lorenzo's death.¹⁸⁶ The first three books of the epistolary leave no doubt as to its real goals: we are in front of a gallery of portraits of *homines docti* that make up the network that would sustain Poliziano's own reputation: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Poliziano's most intimate friend and arguably the dominating figure in the whole epistolary (*Ep.* I,

¹⁸⁴ See Martelli 1995, 184-255; Butler 2006, vii-xii.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* viii. Martelli 1995, 184-218.

¹⁸⁶ Thus, it is not surprising the minimal role occupied in this work by the figure of the Magnificent, as noticed by Vittore Branca (Branca 1993.)

3-8); Ermolao Barbaro (*Ep.* I, 9-14); Pomponio Leto (*Ep.* I, 15-18); Battista Guarini (*Ep.* I, 19-23); Filippo Beroaldo the Elder (*Ep.* II, 1-2); Niccolò Leonicensio (*Ep.* II, 3-7), and many others.¹⁸⁷

Poliziano's proud sense of belonging to a caste is palpable in the exclusive counterpart to the "hall of fame" I have just described, and is particularly evident in his polemic with Merula, which occupies a relatively large section of the *Liber epistolarum*. In 1483, Merula moved to Milan to become its official historiographer and served in the court of the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza il Moro. At the publication of Poliziano's *Miscellanea* in 1489, Merula accused him to be a plagiarist.¹⁸⁸ It was Giovan Francesco Benedetti, a minor figure in the Milanese circle of literati, that informed Poliziano of Merula's plans:

I would not stop warning him, urging and earnestly soliciting him to desist from such an invidious purpose. I affirmed indeed that (had he done so) he would have provoked against him not only the veteran soldier Poliziano, but also Pico-- whom you rightly call "phoenix"--and the whole community [*academia*] of most learned men. They, being versed in the study of letters, would strenuously take Poliziano's side. But as a matter of fact, my warning was completely ineffective and vain. So, I shall transcribe the invective as soon as he composes it. But the mountains will be in labor and a ridiculous mouse will be born.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ The book obviously opens with two letters to Piero de' Medici, who is also its dedicatee.

¹⁸⁸ See Gabotto and Badini Confalonieri 1893, 318-38; Santoro 1952; Perotto Sali 1978; Fabbri 1996.

¹⁸⁹ "Ego autem virum admonere non cessabam, hortans et enixe rogans ut ab huiusmodi invidioso desisteret instituto. Affirmabam enim se non tantum Politianum veteranum militem, sed Picum etiam, quem tu iure Phoenicem appellas in se concitaturum omnem denique doctissimorum virorum academiam, qui cum bonarum literarum studiosi sint, Politiani partes acerrime defendent [*Ald*: defendant] Verum irrita et vana nostra fuit omnis admonitio. Nam transcripturus invectivam quam primum in lucem dabit: sed parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus." (*Ep.* VI, 8 [*Op.* 82].) The letter has no date, but it is certainly from after 1491, when Merula started composing his *opusculum*, which was never published.

It is noteworthy that Benedetti, by employing the term “academia,” seems to hint at a sort of structured group of intellectuals, and not to a loose circle of people kept together by the mere fact of studying literature. One of Poliziano’s goals will be to build up a sense of estrangement between Merula and that community of scholars, as he writes to the latter in early 1494: “I must admit that I was greatly surprised by the fact that some of your close acquaintances wrote me--people to whom I have not yet replied for the respect that I have toward you--telling me that you have started insulting all the professors of our age.”¹⁹⁰ These words are echoed in another letter that Jacopo Antiquario, a Milan-based humanist and close friend of Poliziano’s, who wrote him on February 15, 1494: “Merula claims for himself an eminent role: let’s concede this role to him, an ambitious and deserving man, but under the condition that you will not be second to him, except for age.”¹⁹¹ Merula was certainly an ambitious man; he was probably intelligent enough to have sensed, one might guess, Poliziano’s networking project and his intention of leaving him out of it, so that he wrote to the Florentine “grammaticus”:

With regards to what you are indignant about and cannot bear, that is, that I have often said that the professors of our age do not seem to me well learned, I beg you to abstain from anger and indignation. It is apparent enough from my commentaries, which enjoy quite a circulation, what Merula’s value is in Latin scholarship. The *Centuriae* that I have composed will march out among the people to the battle: who will resist to their force and impetus?¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ “Illud me fateor valde mirari, scripsisse ad me familiares quosdam tuos, quibus adhuc ego tui honoris causa ne respondi quidem, solere te in omnes invehī nostrae aetatis professores” (*Ep.* XI, 2 [*Op.* 148]).

¹⁹¹ “Inter professores primas sibi partes vindicat: id ambienti concedatur et merenti, sed ea lege ut ab illo secundus esse non debeas, nisi aetatis concessu” (*Ep.* XI, 3 [*ibid.*]).

¹⁹² “Quod autem indignaris et aegre fers, quod dictitem, nostri temporis professores non admodum doctos mihi videri: abstineas quaeso ab ira ed indignatione.

Unfortunately for Merula, there was neither battle nor impetus, as he died less than two months later. Consequently, the assault of his *Centuriae* had to succumb to the expectedly cruel comments made by those from the “ordo grammaticorum,” as in Poliziano’s letter to Beroaldo of November 24, 1493:

I am happy that you liked what I wrote to Merula, who I wish would have not been taken away from us so rapidly, as we would have tested what he had never put to writing. And I believe, but let this be said with modesty, that he would have died, if he already hadn’t. Now I would not want to take a vengeance upon his ashes and bones, even if I could. Also, I am by no means waiting for one of his writings that came out as a posthumous work: “he fooled the crows leaving them with their mouth open.” Indeed, not the *Centuriae*, nor the *Quaestiones Plautinae* will ever appear. This is how that elegant man tricked posterity. He would have been certainly a worthy man and we professors would not have despised him, if he had not despised us professors.¹⁹³

Satis enim constat ex commentariis nostris, qui circumferentur, quid in re Latina praestare valeat Merula. Exibunt in publicum et in aciem elucubratae nostrae Centuriae, quarum vim et impetum quis sustinebit? Terga protinus dabunt et diffugient” (*Ep.* XI, 5 [*Op.* 118]).

¹⁹³ “Laetor autem placuisse tibi, quae ad Merulam scripserim, qui utinam nobis ereptus tam subito non fuisset: exegissemus ad obrusam quidquid ille unquam litteris mandaverat. Ac puto (quod cum modestia dictum sit) perierat Merula, nisi periisset. Nunc cineres, et ossa persequi non libet, ne si liceat quidem. Nec est quod ulla expectemus illius scripta quasi posthuma: corvos delusit hianteis. Nam nee Centuriae usquam nec Plautinae quaestiones comparent. Ita lepidus homo posteris imposuit. Dignus omnino tamen, quem professores non contemneremus, nisi professores ipse omneis contempsisset” (*Ep.* VI, 3 [*Op.* 76]) Despite his declared intentions, Poliziano kept mistreating Merula after his death even in this very letter via a complex system of erudite allusions. The reference to the crows with the gaping mouth is a modeled on Horace *Ser.* 2.5.55-56: “it often happens that the clerk, boiled up from policeman, tricks the mouth-gaped crow” (“plerumque recoctus/ scriba ex quinqueviro corvum deludet hiantem.”) In this satire, centered on the activity of will-hunters, Horace speaks of a former humble magistrate (the “quinquevir”) that has become a clerk (“scriba”) and that in writing his will has become so shrewd as to be able to trick the legacy-hunter, here associated with the “crow” (probably reminiscent of the Aesopian fable of the fox and the crow,) leaving him nothing. With this reference, Poliziano hits his target twice: by putting “crow” in the plural, he refers it to himself and to the other “grammatici,” and in so doing portraits Merula as the former policeman, that is has someone who has climbed the social ladder. Also he implies that Merula has left them no legacy, as it is confirmed by Poliziano’s mention of posterity further in the letter.

Poliziano's untimely death occurred less than a year later, which makes it difficult to assess the viability of his project; however, it is still possible to appreciate its importance in fifteenth-century intellectual history. Over the course of the Quattrocento, the abstract ideal of the "respublica literaria," mentioned as early as 1417 in a letter by Francesco Barbaro to Poggio Bracciolini, had appeared in various forms and under many names, all traceable back to the model vividly described by Leonardo Bruni in his *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, which stood as the humanistic paradigm of humanistic learned conversation. Poliziano's novelty consisted in channeling that ideal into a professional academic setting, where "academy" had to be understood not as an occasional gathering of intellectuals, but as an institution inextricably connected to the city of its establishment, and yet opened to an "international"--i.e. extra-urban--dimension articulated on a great network of scholars. It is quite telling in this respect that in the very moment in which--according to Bots's and Waquet's census--the expression "respublica literaria" seems to appear more frequently, Poliziano chooses to speak of "ordo grammaticorum," likely to further emphasize the role of the components of the "respublica literaria," rather than the body of knowledge and practices that they shared.¹⁹⁴

In conclusion, Poliziano's notion of "grammaticus," with all its articulations, is the culmination of a life dedicated to literature and scholarship and dominated by the thought of their importance. The circumstances from

¹⁹⁴ Bots and Waquet 1997, 12. For once Poliziano was long-sighted: "ordo literatorum" and "ordo philologorum" indicate well-established realities in the 1532 dialogue *De Philologia* of the great French philologist Guillaume Budé (1467-1540). On this, see Budé 2001, 11.

which the formulation originated were both practical and ideological, as they stemmed from the necessity of restructuring a relation of patronage, as well as from the persuasion, in the beginning of 1480s, that only the mastery of the classics and their tradition could secure Florence a position of prestige in the international cultural arena.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1. “Et in Arcadia Ego”

The most captivating aspect of Poliziano’s poetry is arguably its idyllic dimension, epitomized in the *Stanze per la giostra*. This diffuse impression obtained the ultimate sanction of literary historiography in Francesco De Sanctis’ authoritative *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870), where the section devoted to Poliziano is found under the rubric “Stanze.” This critical move is made more striking because this very section entirely exhausts the space reserved in this book to Quattrocento literature, for it comprises Leon Battista Alberti, Luigi Pulci, Lorenzo de’ Medici, and many others. As a result, in De Sanctis’ vision, the landscape of Italian literary fifteenth century appears dominated by idyll: “that carefree and sensual world could only give you the idyllic and the comic.”¹⁹⁵ These words were echoed by other influential commentators such as Croce (“in considering that vast literary production, the first thing that jumps to the eyes is the poetry that De Sanctis’ called ‘idyllic’ and ‘comic’ which was, more than anything else, erotic, but also variously voluptuous; it was the expression of the enjoyment of beautiful nature, mythological fantasies, merry spectacles, and a life that was believed to be peaceful and blessed”), Sapegno (Poliziano “has forsaken the intimate and intense fervor of Petrarch as well as the powerful and turbulent humanity of Boccaccio, to withdraw into the harmonious and polished sweetness

¹⁹⁵ De Sanctis 1996, 345. He later refers the adjective “comico” to Luigi Pulci, Burchiello, etc.

of an idyllic vision”), and many others.¹⁹⁶ On these scholarly premises, it was inevitable that in literary historiography on Poliziano idyll would eventually become the general interpretive category comprising the qualities commonly associated with the idea of “beauty.”

Now, given the undeniable presence of the idyllic in Poliziano’s poetry, issues may arise when we put its meaning into question. In fact, it is now time to reckon with the fact that that “carefree and sensual world” of which De Sanctis speaks, was all but carefree. In the following pages it will be argued that the function of the idyll is not an escapist but, rather, a representational one, that is, idyll not as a fictive dimension where to forget the distress of the real world but rather idyll as the setting for tragedy. Idyll is then a means of a more comprehensive poetic strategy, not its end, as death appears at the horizon of the idyll, which is there not to be contemplated but to be counteracted, negated, destroyed.

In what follows, I shall investigate the theme of death in three narratives: the *Epicedion in Albieram*, the *Stanze per la giostra*, and the *Fabula di Orfeo*, in order to illustrate how their ultimate meaning is determined by the event of death. By borrowing an image made famous by the painter Guercino, we can say that in these works idyll turns into Arcady, where even death finds its own place (“et in Arcadia ego”).¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ See the anthology of criticism in Lo Cascio 1970, 161-240, citations respectively at 196 and 206.

¹⁹⁷ Panofski 1955.

3.2. Albiera

For Poliziano, death became matter of poetry at the earliest stage of his career. In the summer of 1473, the untimely departure of Albiera degli Albizi--struck down by fever at the age of fifteen--prompted her betrothed, Sigismondo della Stufa, to put together an anthology to commemorate his promised bride. Sigismondo was the son of Agnolo della Stufa, a philo-medicean politician to whom Poliziano was serving as secretary before being admitted in the Medici's household. All the most prominent Florence-based intellectuals took part in the endeavor promoted by Sigismondo with a wide array of writings. Lastly, he sent a dedication copy to Annalena Malatesta, the founder of the monastery where Albiera was educated.¹⁹⁸

Scholars agree that Poliziano's contribution to the project, a Latin elegy in 286 verses entitled *Epicedion in Albieram*, a mixture of highly pathetic inspiration and peregrine erudition, surpassed those of his contemporaries.¹⁹⁹ The *Epicedion* belongs in the tradition of consolatory literature, which comprises, in addition to elegiac verses, also funeral orations, epistles, dialogues, and manuals, all aimed at providing solace and advice to those who suffer.²⁰⁰ Influenced by classical philosophy and literature, and enriched in the light of the Christian doctrine, consolatory literature gained quite a momentum in the Italian Renaissance, when it eventually "came to include an increasingly secular canon of

¹⁹⁸ See *Epicedion* 108-9. This manuscript (for which see *Mostra*, 93-4, no. 96) contains most of the works composed in the occasion of Albiera's death, including six epitaphs by Poliziano, not present in the 1498 Aldine but published by Isidoro Del Lungo (see Del Lungo 1867, 145-7).

¹⁹⁹ The *Epicedion in Albieram* has enjoyed remarkable critical attention, for which see Patetta 1917-8; Perosa 1940 and 1946; Maier 1966, 169-179; Bigi 1967, 126-134; Bettinzoli 1995, 39-65; Bausi 2003a.

²⁰⁰ See McClure 1991, esp. 3-17; 155-161; Most 2010.

ills that included not only the familiar tragedies of bereavement, fear of death, and illness, but also those more esoteric or wordly sorrows of poetic sweet grief, unrealized temporal ambition, and philosophical melancholy.”²⁰¹

Francesco Bausi, the most recent editor of the *Epicedion*, has indicated the texts that most influenced its composition: Propertius’ elegies (IV, 11), Ovid’s *Amores* (II, 9; III, 3), Statius’ *Silvae* (II, 1; II, 6; V, 1) among the classical models, and Cristoforo Landino’s *Xandra* (II, 12; III, 4; 7; 18) and Ugolino Verino’s eulogies, among Poliziano’s contemporaries.²⁰² In different degrees, all these texts display “variations on loss”--be the object of this loss a lover, a slave, a parrot, the poet Tibullus--from which Poliziano cherry-picks motifs, single words or whole phrases recombined in a variety of fashions, according to his signature style.²⁰³ Still, our attention will be focused especially on Statius’ *Silvae*--namely II, 1, II, 6, and V, 1--that constitute the main structural model of the *Epicedion*.²⁰⁴ These Statian *Silvae* are all “consolatory ‘silvae’” and their scheme is articulated in four divisions: *exordium*, *laudatio*, *lamentatio*, and *solacia*.²⁰⁵ In

²⁰¹ McClure 1991, 155.

²⁰² To these works, all traceable back to the consolatory literary tradition, one should add other numerous stylistic sources duly indicated by Bausi in his commentary, such as Lucretius, Vergil, Sidonius Apollinaris, Claudianus, etc. *Xandra* is the Latin *canzoniere* of Cristoforo Landino (1425-1498), professor of poetics and rhetoric in the University of Florence since 1458, politician linked to the Medici, and famous commentator of Dante. Ugolino Verino (1438-1516), was a Florentine elegiac and epic poet.

²⁰³ See Martelli 1995, 267-328.

²⁰⁴ Bausi 2003a, lx. On Poliziano and Statius, see Pastore Stocchi 1966-67; Cesarini Martinelli 1975, 1978a, 1978b, 1982; Reeve 1977. The Latin word “epicedion”, modeled on the Greek, is attested for the first time in the preface to Statius’ second *silva* (Asso 2008, 179). Poliziano’s interests for Statius were revived in his last years, especially in the conversations with the Bolognese philologist Filippo Beroaldo the Elder (see *Ep.* VI, 1).

²⁰⁵ I am here using the terminology adopted by Kenneth Latta Baucom in his study of Statius’ consolatory poems (Baucom 1963, 23). See also Newmyer 1979, 59-74.

the *exordium*, the part traditionally more exposed to stylistic *variatio*, the poet introduces the subject matter; in the *laudatio* he describes and praises the departed; in the *lamentatio* we have the account of the departed's death; and, finally, in the *solacia* we have the actual consolatory speech.

For the *Epicedion in Albieram* Poliziano closely follows this Statian model, but he makes a number of changes that affect dramatically the poem's whole meaning, especially in the second and third part.²⁰⁶ He especially introduces a rhetorical device that will play an important role in his poetic production but that, to my knowledge, has been completely neglected by the scholarship: I shall call it "the metabolic device." It consists of an abrupt interruption of a narrative, through an action tragically affecting the protagonist of that narrative. I appropriated the term "metabolic" from Aristotle's account of tragic plots in the *Poetics* (1451a, 13-15) where the Greek verb μεταβάλλειν and its cognates are employed to indicate the changes and reversals of fortune.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, the rhetorical effects brought about by the metabolic device fall in that quest for pathos that seems to have obsessed Poliziano in those years. In fact, over the 1470s Poliziano heavily annotated his Virgilian incunabulum (Paris, B.N. Inc. Rés.g Yc. 236)²⁰⁸ with passages taken from Euripides, Lucian, Donatus' commentary to Terence, and especially from Macrobius' *Saturnalia*. Poliziano devoted particular attention to that section of the *Saturnalia* where Macrobius

²⁰⁶ The following analysis will be focused chiefly on the rhetorical construction of the text and only cursorily it will touch upon other stylistic aspects, for which see Perosa 1946 and Bausi 2003a.

²⁰⁷ Now, it is not sure whether Poliziano was already familiar with Aristotle's work by the time he was composing the *Epicedion*, but his notes to Statius' *Silvae* (cf *Comm. Silv.* 55, 21 and 59, 15) attest that he knew the *Poetics* at least indirectly. On Poliziano and the *Poetics*, see Branca 1983, esp. 32 n.23, and Godman 1998, 59-64.

²⁰⁸ See *Mostra*, 29-30 no.15.

discusses the techniques aimed at producing dramatic effects. The metabolic device here in discussion can be seen as a combination of some of the techniques regarding the condition of the person involved, such as “pathos a iuventa” (where the emotional focus is on the young age) or “pathos a fortuna” (used “now to stir pity, now resentment”).²⁰⁹ Here poor Albiera is practically a case study.

The *laudatio* of the *Epicedion* bears a perfect example of metabolic device, when thirty-five dense lines describing Albiera’s qualities and culminating with a splendid train of allegories of the perfect bride’s virtues are pulverized in the space of a line: “in a moment the cruel fate has turned all this into ashes” (43).²¹⁰ A few verses after, the *laudatio* is resumed and expanded in a characteristic Statian way, i.e. through aetiology,²¹¹ that is by telling about the cause and origin of Albiera’s death. In those days Florence was honoring Eleonor of Aragon, visiting town on her way to Ferrara, where she was going to marry Duke Ercole I d’Este. It was during the festive dances that Albiera caught a fatal fever. Here Poliziano’s description of the young bride finds its apex:

Over the other girls, her looks the most beautiful, springs out Albiera, emanating from her face a tremulous splendor. A breeze ruffles the hair diffused on her white shoulders, her eyes beam forth a charming light; she surpasses her companions as much as glowing Lucifer with its reddish face overcomes the lesser stars. Stunned, the young and the old look at Albiera: he whom her beauty or her modesty do not move is made of iron. With cheerful spirit and benevolent praise, with a nod, with a glance, with the voice, they all commend Albiera (79-88).²¹²

²⁰⁹ Macrobius 2011, II, 164. The attention has been drawn to Macrobius by Daniela Delcorno Branca who has studied the effects of the “pathos a repetitione” on Poliziano’s vernacular production (Delcorno Branca 2004). As shown above, I believe that the same can be done with regard to his production in the classical languages.

²¹⁰ “Quae cuncta in cineres fati gravis intulit hora.”

²¹¹ See Newmyer 61-62.

²¹² *Emicat ante alias vultu pulcherrima nymphas
Albiera, et tremulum spargit ab ore iubar.
Aura quatit fusos in candida terga capillos,*

But again this climactic moment is reversed by the intervention of jealous Rhamnusia, goddess of Envy that upon her encounter with Fever (*Febris*) and her dreadful companions (Mourning, Death, Wail, Complaint, Pallor, Tremor, etc.) entrusts her with the foul deed of killing Albiera:

Upon her [*scil.* Albiera] Rhamnusia turns the angry eyes, and with a scant noise quietly mutters away. Then, fatally favoring the miserable girl, it gives gleam to her eyes, and raises her head higher than of wont; and to trouble at once such a joy, it, cruel, seeks a way so that the virgin could perish (89-94).²¹³

These threshold lines stress the apex of Albiera's beauty as well as prelude fatally to her end, according to a typical metabolic device. These lines also usher us into the *lamentatio*, with, at its center, the extraordinary episode of Fever, whose dreary portrait is juxtaposed by contrast to that of Albiera's:

In her burning head, the goddess bears wild she-vipers, always vomiting poison from their Stygian mouths; her eyes are inflamed with blood, her hollow temples shiver, sweat bathes her neck, pallor pervades her chest; also, the tongue, the mind's interpreter, drips a livid venom, and her dark mouth exhales fiery vapor, from which a deep breath emits a foul smell; the throat, copious of lethiferous fire, rattles; from the mouth fall down yellow-stained spittles, from the loose nose runs a continuous flow. Neither rest nor sleep press her shrivelled limbs, a harsh cough resounds in her salty jaws, laughter is absent, the sparse teeth lie neglected with cavity, the dirty hand reaches off with its lunated fingernails... (107-120)²¹⁴

irradiant dulci lumina nigra face;
tamque suas vincit comites, quam Lucifer ore
purpureo rutilans astra minora premit.
Attoniti Albieram spectant iuvenesque senesque;
ferreus est quem non forma pudor ve movet.
Mentibus Albieram laetis plausuque secundo,
Albieram nutu, lumine, voce probant.

²¹³ Vertit in hanc torvos Rhamnusia luminis orbes
Exiguoque movet murmura parva sono.
Tum miserae letale favens, oculisque nitorem
adicit, et solito celsius ora levat;
tantaque perturbans extemplo gaudia, tristem
qua pereat virgo quaerit, acerba, viam.

²¹⁴ Vertice diva feras ardenti attollit echidnas,

Poliziano's stylistic inclination for opposite structures, graphically epitomized in the coupling of the odes *Puella* (Od. VIII) and *In Anum* (Od. IX), can explain only partially the relation between the description of the young girl and that of Fever.²¹⁵ In fact, the two descriptions belong in different divisions of the text, the former in the *laudatio* and the latter in the *lamentatio*, so that their juxtaposition reflects on the relation between these two. Again, a look at the Statian model can offer some insights. In Statius' consolatory poems, "the 'laudatio' [...] often constitutes the bulk of the poem, which is a reflection of the nature of the 'Silvae' as encomiastic literature,"²¹⁶ while, in comparison, the *lamentatio* appears to be of lesser import. In the *Epicedion* this relation is inverted and, for as nuanced as it may be, the *laudatio* occupies slightly more than thirty lines (25-44; 78-88), whereas the *lamentatio* extends for about one hundred thirty lines (89-222).

These sheer quantitative data, along with the refined rhetorical apparatus described above, show what Poliziano wanted to make of Albiera as literary object. Albiera is the first beautiful object falling in the hands of our humanist, and her image is also the first to experiment its own aesthetic instability. That for

quae sanie Stygio semper ab ore vomunt;
sanguinei flagrant oculi, cava tempora frigent,
colla madens sudor, pectora pallor obit;
atque animi interpres liventi lingua veneno
manat, et atra quatit fervidus ora vapor,
spiritus unde gravis tetrum devolvit odorem;
laetifera strident guttura plena face,
sputa cadunt rictu croceo contacta colore,
perpetuo naris laxa fluore madet.
Nulla quies nullique premunt membra arida somni,
faucibus in salsis tussis acerba sonat,
risus abest, rari squalent rubigine dentes,
sordida lunato prominet ungue manus.

²¹⁵ Cotton Hill 1951; Bettinzoli 1995, 46-58.

²¹⁶ Newmyer 68.

Poliziano beauty exists but cannot last is less a matter of stylistic imitation of classical models--the umpteenth variation on the “tempus fugit,” a topos that became viral in Humanistic literature--than a belief that is at the same time existential and aesthetic. The volatility of time implies a destruction of what is present and this very destruction can be object of beautiful poetry: beautiful because it is perfect in its adherence to the undergoing destruction. This is exactly what I meant when at the beginning of this chapter I spoke of representational function of the idyll against an escapist one: beauty not as shelter or as spiritual antidote but as the condition of an object in certain danger.

3.3. Simonetta

Death looms large over the *Stanze per la giostra di Giuliano de' Medici*, at the point of interfering meta-textually with its actual composition.²¹⁷ With this *poemetto* in two books, Poliziano aimed first at glorifying a political affair which featured Lorenzo conceiving the *giostra* (joust) of the title as a festive seal of the alliance of Florence with Milan, Venice, and Rome (4 September 1474)²¹⁸ and Giuliano--the lesser but more glamorous of the Medicean Dioscuri-- jousting and winning in piazza Santa Croce, in January 1475. But three years after and a few churches away, Giuliano lay dead in Santa Maria del Fiore, murdered at twenty-five in the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478. The lady to whom Giuliano was offering his service--since, as we all know, there is no chivalric tournament without a lady--

²¹⁷ The *Stanze* represent Poliziano's major claim to fame in the history of Italian poetry and are by far the most studied of his works. The massive bibliography is well covered up to the early 1950s by Lo Cascio 1954. Other important bibliographical sources are Bessi 1992 and Bausi 2006b. See also Orvieto 2009, 220-266.

²¹⁸ See Walter 2005, 123.

was Simonetta Vespucci, an aristocratic Genoan beauty.²¹⁹ As odd as it might seem, Simonetta herself died prematurely in 1476, while Poliziano was still composing the *Stanze*. Interrupted by the death of the people it was meant to celebrate, the work was then left unfinished to be printed--“almost” posthumously--by Poliziano’s pupil Alessandro Sarti in the *Cose vulgare* (Bologna, August 1494).²²⁰

But besides being actual people, Giuliano and Simonetta were also the main characters of the *Stanze*. In fact, in the fiction of the poem, the former is the hero, disguised as Iulio (or Iulo), the son of Aeneas, with all the dynastic implications this name carried with itself, and portayed as Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, with his predilection for hunting game over chasing girls. In Book I of the *poemetto*, during a hunt, the god of love, irritated by the hero’s preference, eventually leads him in the presence of a beautiful nymph, Simonetta. This is their first and only encounter: she eventually disappears, while he, mad of love, returns to his hunting companions, who are desperately seeking for him (narratively, the *Stanze* tell of lost and found objects). In Book II, in a dream Iulio

²¹⁹ See Farina 2001.

²²⁰ The fact that the poem has been left unfinished has obviously impacted on its interpretation. If for some scholars, most notably Martelli 1992b and 1995, a comprehensive attempt to understanding the *poemetto* is still viable, for others it is “fatally compromised”: “one asks if the unity of the *Stanze*, also and especially from the point of view of poetry, lies more in its micro-structures rather than in its macro-structures, that is, if it lies more in an all-embracing exquisite formal tension, rather than in a global design fatally compromised or, in any event, conveniently undefined in many of its contours. One asks, in sum, if it is the accumulation of precious details that justifies the whole, or viceversa” (Puccini 1992, li).

is prepared to descend in the joust equipped with the arms of Minerva. He is ready for the Glory. Only, in the same dream Simonetta's death is announced.²²¹

Then she [*scil.* Minerva] armed Iulio with her spoils, and made him blaze with gold; when he had reached the end of his battle, she entwined the olive and laurel around his head. There his joy seemed to turn into mourning: he saw his sweet treasure taken from him, he saw his nymph, enveloped in a sad cloud, cruelly taken from before his eyes. (*Stanze* II, 33)²²²

This time Simonetta has not just disappeared, as in Book I, 55, but has actually left this world: the word "lutto" (mourning) is in fact to be taken literally, as shown by the reference to Petrarch, where the expression "dolce tesoro" (sweet treasure) directly points to death: "tolto m'hai, o Morte, il mio doppio tesoro" (*RVF* 269, 5).

Simonetta's departure is the central to the thanatology of the *Stanze*. As in the case of Albiera, death is not just one of the many events narrated, but a key element in the economy of the work. Going back to the Guercino metaphor mentioned above, Simonetta represents--or actually embodies with her own beautiful figure soon to be tolled away by death--the "et in Arcadia ego" moment of Poliziano's vernacular poetry. Still, to date, scholars have devoted scant or no

²²¹ To be sure, the plot of the *Stanze* is not as basic and schematic as it is presented here, and several of its parts would certainly offer material for further discussion. Still, here I am not attempting at a new interpretation of the whole but I am just following the thread of thanatology, as explained in the Chapter I.

²²² Poi Iulio di suo spoglie armava tutto
e tutto fiammeggiar lo facea d'auro;
quando era al fin del guerreggiar condotto,
al capo gl'intrecciava oliva e lauro.
Ivi tornar pareva suo gioia in lutto:
vedeasi tolto il suo dolce tesoro,
vedea suo ninfa, in trista nube avolta,
dagli occhi crudelmente esserli tolta."

The Italian text is given according to the Bausi edition (2006a), while the English translation is by David Quint (Quint 2005), with slight modifications.

attention to this episode of the *poemetto*, despite the eloquence of the stanzas narrating it:

The air seemed to turn dark and the depths of the abyss to tremble; the heavens and the moon seemed to turn bloody, and the stars seemed to fall into the deep. Then he sees his nymph rise again happy in the form of Fortune and the world grows beautiful again: he sees her govern his life and make them both eternal through fame.

In these ominous signs the youth [*scil.* Giuliano] was shown the changing course of his fate: too happy, if early death were not placing its cruel bit on his delight. But what can be gainsaid to Fortune who slackens and pulls the reins of our affairs? The flattery and curses of others do not prevail, for she remains deaf and rules us as she pleases.

Therefore what can so much lamentation avail? Why do we still bathe our cheeks in tears? If need be that she must govern and move us, if mortal force can do nothing against her, if she broods over the world with her wings, and turns and tempers her wheel as she wishes. Blessed is he who frees his thoughts from her and encloses himself completely within his own virtue!

Happy he who pays no heed to her nor gives in to her heavy assaults, but like a rock that stands against the sea, or a tower that resists the north wind, awaits her blows with an unconcerned brow, always prepared for her changes! He depends only on himself, he trusts himself alone: not governed by chance, he governs chance. (Book II, 34-37)²²³

²²³ L'aier tutta pareva divenir bruna,
e tremar tutto dello abisso il fondo;
parea sanguigno el cel farsi e la luna,
e cader giù le stelle nel profondo.
Poi vede lieta in forma di Fortuna
surger suo ninfa e rabbellirsi il mondo,
e prender lei di sua vita governo,
e lui con seco far per fama eterno.

Sotto cotali ambagi al giovinetto
fu mostro de' suo' fati il leggier corso:
troppo felice, se nel suo diletto
non metteva Morte acerba il crudel morso.
Ma che puote a Fortuna esser disdetto,
ch'a nostre cose allenta e stringe il morso?

As some have pointed out, the immediate aftermath of the death of Simonetta is described as that of Christ's, also with references to the narration of the Biblical apocalypse. Furthermore, that account shares sharp textual similarities with what Dante says of the death of Beatrice in chapter XXIII of the *Vita Nuova*--a rather telling comparison after Charles S. Singleton's insight on Beatrice as *figura Christi*.²²⁴ In fact, there is no doubt that Poliziano hinted at the demise of Simonetta as something eventful, something that goes well beyond its mere diegetic value in the context of the *poemetto*. On the other hand, the relation that Poliziano entertains with Simonetta does not have that personal connotation substantiating the relation between Dante and Beatrice or that between Petrarca

Né val perch'altri la lusinghi o morda,
ch'a suo modo ne guida, e sta pur sorda.

Adunque il tanto lamentar che giova?
A che di pianto pur bagnar le gote,
se pur convien che lei ne guidi e muova?
Se mortal forza contro a lei non puote?
Se con sue penne il nostro mondo cova,
e tempra e volge, come vuol, le rote?
Beato qual da lei suo pensier solve,
e tutto drento alla virtù s'involve!

O felice colui che lei non cura
e che a' suoi gravi assalti non si arrende,
ma come scoglio che incontro al mar dura,
o torre che da Borea si difende,
suo colpi aspetta con fronte sicura,
e sta sempre provisto a sua vicende!
Da sé sol pende, e 'n se stesso si fida,
né guidato è dal caso, anzi lui guida.

²²⁴ For the biblical sources, cf. *Apoc.* VI:12-13 *Matthew* 27:45-52, *Luke* 23: 44-45. See especially Singleton 1949, 6-24. In annotating that chapter of the *Vita Nuova*, Domenico De Robertis argued for the great importance of the motive of the "death of madonna," holding that "from this moment onward it will be fateful for the history of Italian poetry" (Alighieri 1980, 152).

and Laura, with the ensuing dramatic impact that the death of beloved has on their intellectual biographies--whether real or fictional.

The character of Simonetta is at the center of the interpretation that Mario Martelli has given to the *Stanze* in the numerous occasions in which he has treated the *poemetto*.²²⁵ In his most recent formulation, that fits into a purely Neoplatonic framework, the *Stanze* have an ascensional structure, designing Iulio's path to the "fullness of his earthly experience": Giuliano's victory in the joust "was not just a trial of his valor: it was actually a step in the path that, regulating the sensitive life to the political one, and the political life to the contemplative one, would have led Lorenzo's younger brother to the fullness of his earthly experience."²²⁶ In this context, Simonetta allegorizes the rational soul and the active life, representing, in so doing, an intermediate step in the path to contemplation. Martelli comes to this conclusion by recurring to a wide array of literary and philosophical sources, but in his discussion he does not treat the death of Simonetta. The only conclusion that Martelli's silence authorizes is that he apparently does not consider this event relevant in a general reading of the *poemetto*.

In fact, there is a lot at stake in the lines describing the departure of the beloved, perhaps even too much at stake, a stunning accumulation of meanings and meaningful structures often in contradiction: as when Simonetta performs as the instrument of the god of love who inhabits her (I, 41) but also as his own unexpected torturer, as when she fastens him to the column and breaks into

²²⁵ See especially Martelli 1979, 1992b, and 1995.

²²⁶ Martelli 1995, 137.

pieces his bow and arrow (II, 28); or when, as goddess of Fortune, she is at the same time, *secunda* and *atrox* (II, 34-37.) Not surprisingly, a critic spoke of Simonetta as “a schizophrenic woman.”²²⁷

But before we proceed, we should not forget that Simonetta was not just a literary Politianesque creature, but a myth of beauty celebrated by Lorenzo de’ Medici himself, who commemorates her departure in the opening of his *Comento*: “I wrote the first four sonnets about a lady’s death, which not only wrung these sonnets forth from me, but universally drew tears from the eyes of all the men and women who had knowledge of her.”²²⁸ Immediately thereafter, Lorenzo explains his decision of commencing a book with such an “absurd” move, that is, beginning from the fact of death, i.e. from the end. The reasons are eminently philosophical, as demonstrated by a chain of syllogisms worth quoting at length:

It is the judgment of good philosophers that the corruption of one thing is the creation of another, and the termination and end of one bad thing, to be the first step and the beginning of another. And this comes to pass on necessity, because, since, according to the philosophers, form and species are immortal, by necessity it is proper for them always to pass through matter. And from this perpetual motion is necessarily born a continual generation of new things, which occurs without the intermission of any time and with such a very brief presence of the existence of the thing and of its state of being in that particular quality or form, that one must confess the end of one thing to be the beginning of another. And according to Aristotle [*Phys.* I.7; I.9], deprivation is the beginning of created things. And from this one concludes that in human affairs the end and the beginning are the same thing. I do not say indeed that they are the end and the beginning of the same thing but that what is the end of one

²²⁷ Orvieto 2009, 247.

²²⁸ Wyatt Cook 1995, 55. “Li quattro sonetti furono da me composti per la morte d’una, che non solo estorse questi sonetti da me, ma le lacrime universalmente degli occhi di tutti gli uomini e donne, che ebbero alcuna notizia” (de’ Medici, I, 373).

thing is *immediately* the beginning of another. And, if this is the case, death is most fittingly the beginning for this work of ours²²⁹.

Hardly the same subject could be treated in so different manners. For Lorenzo, the death of Simonetta is a point in the circle of decay and regeneration, for Poliziano it is the interruption of a line of development. Even if we espouse Martelli's idea that the *Stanze* have a Neoplatonic structure--that is, if we ultimately agree that that line of development of the *poemetto* is an ascending one, from matter to spirit, so to speak--we cannot rule out the fact that an interruption has occurred. For Lorenzo, this break is not a catastrophic rupture, but rather a moment in the flux of lifetime; for Poliziano it is an earthquake, an apocalyptic falling of the stars ("and the stars seem to fall in the deep.") In other words, that Simonetta dies, for Lorenzo is an idea to speculate upon, for Poliziano a fact to mourn about. Similarly, while in the *Comento* the figure of Simonetta is multiplied in a series of allegories illustrating the interplay of life and death, light and darkness, and so forth, in the *poemetto* she undergoes an unprecedented *post mortem* metamorphosis, turning into the goddess of Fortune.

This singular resurrection is obviously opposed to that of Christ/Beatrice of the declared Dantean model: while Beatrice is eventually transfigured as the

²²⁹ "È sentenza de' buoni filosofi la corruzione d'una cosa essere creazione d'un'altra, e il termine e fine d'uno male essere grado e principio d'un altro; e questo di necessità avviene, perché, essendo la forma e spezie, secondo e filosofi, immortale, di necessità si conviene sempre si muova della materia, e di questo perpetuo moto necessariamente nasce una continua generazione di cose nuove, le quale essendo senza intermissione di tempo alcuno e con una brevissima presenza dello essere delle cose e dello stato d'esse in quella tale qualità o forma, bisogna confessare il fine d'una cosa essere principio d'un'altra. E secondo Aristotele, la privazione è principio delle cose create, e per questo si conclude nelle cose umane fine e principio essere una medesima cosa; non dico già fine e principio d'una cosa medesima, ma quello che è fine d'una cosa, *immediate* è principio d'un'altra. E se questo è, molto convenientemente la morte è principio a questa nostra opera" (de' Medici, I, 373-374 [Wyatt Cook 1995, 55-57]).

pilgrim's guide in the *Commedia*, here Simonetta turns into the anti-guide par excellence: Fortune--a reverse relation betrayed by the obsessive repetition of the word "guida" and its combinations (four times in less than twenty lines).²³⁰ The traditional "spiritual" exchange between the loving character and his beloved that animated the *Commedia* and the *Canzoniere* (with the protagonists respectively trading carnal love for celestial love or sublimating with the gift of poetry the absence of "madonna") is completely disrupted in the *Stanze*, where the loss of the beloved is not compensated by any reward but is rather jeopardized by the birth of haunting and misleading Fortune. We can concede that Iulio will be "like a rock that stands against the sea, or a tower that resists the north wind, awaiting her blows with an unconcerned brow" but we cannot forget that a second before he was the hero at the apex of his glory.

3.4. Eurydice

Most of the thanatological dynamics that we have seen at play in the *Epicedion* and in the *Stanze* gain full exposure in the *Fabula di Orfeo*, the first secular play in the Italian vernacular and historical fountainhead of Italian opera, "l'Opéra avant l'Opéra", as Romain Rolland put it.²³¹ Poliziano took the subject matter chiefly from Virgil (*Georg.*, IV, 453-527) and Ovid (*Met.*, X, 1-85; XI, 1-84) but limited the mythological references, opted for a less ornate style, and reduced the plot to few elements. The resulting remarkable density was certainly more

²³⁰ Cf *Stanze* I, 35, 8; I, 36, 2-3; I, 37, 8.

²³¹ Quoted in Pirrotta 1969, 1. For bibliographical information, see the fundamental critical edition by Tissoni Benvenuti and the introductions to the various recent editions of the *Orfeo* (Carrai 1988b; Puccini 1992; Bausi 2006a). See also Bessi 1979; Pyle 1980; Bigi 1982; Martelli 1995, 73-101; Orvieto 2009, 312-323.

suitable for a play but also concurred in conferring to the character of Orpheus a paradigmatic role quite rare to encounter in Poliziano's pages, usually overflowing with objects and stories but almost deprived lacking of characters.

As a matter of fact, no fictional character is commonly associated with Poliziano, a singular feature for an author of the Italian literary early canon. Leaving aside the general claim that the creation of autonomous fictional characters was not in the style of Quattrocento humanists', the narration of a fully developed human experience embodied in a man or a woman is absent in his oeuvre. He never wrote comedies or tragedies, nor did he compose epic poems, let alone novellas; in sum, he never dealt creatively with those literary genres where all-round characters are more likely to emerge: even the plethora of major and lesser characters populating the *Detti piacevoli* better suits the anonymous crowds of Flemish painting than the powerful pictures of Piero della Francesca or Luca Signorelli, to name some of Tuscany-based artists contemporary to Poliziano.²³²

Probably, it is not far from the truth to say that the construction of character is alien to Poliziano's *ingegno*. For him the character's internal development, which is key to build up an all-round figure, does not exist: I believe that this is due to the fact that he regarded the human experience that forms the object of a narration not as original but as derived from a model,

²³² Under the title *Detti piacevoli* goes a collection of 432 anecdotes and witty tales in vernacular that Poliziano wrote between 1477 and 1482 and that portray in a lively style and often sarcastic tone the people surrounding the Medici family, including Ficino, Pulci, Botticelli, etc. The text was not published during Poliziano's lifetime and was in fact attributed to him only in the critical edition by Albert Wesselski in 1929. See also Folena 1954; Zanato 1983. It must be said that Poliziano's authorship has been challenged with good arguments by Bowen 1994.

whether mythological or historical. In all cases, he deals with experiences that have been already lived, not developing processes but given facts. For him, actions, gestures, speeches are not the products-in-the-making of a character's thinking mind but fragments of a consumed experience. Ultimately, there cannot be developing characters since the stories from which Poliziano draws his material are fixed in mythology or history.

Nevertheless, Poliziano's Orpheus partially escapes this logic, as Orpheus' myth and figure are in fact a constant point of reference for him. The intrinsic ambiguity of a figure that is at the same time a charming semi-god, a poet, a disgraced husband, and an object of pagan martyrdom, must have been a source of formidable fascination for Poliziano. Orpheus' myth recurs in several crucial parts of his works, at the point that on a macro-textual level we can eventually witness the development of a true character.

In the juvenile *Elegia ad Fontium* (1473)--a fictionalized "day in the life of a humanist," a singular literary genre of Horatian descent (cf *Sat. I, 6*)²³³--Poliziano narrates of a visit he pays to Marsilio Ficino, presenting him as a man of multifarious talent, who

often drives away heavy cares, and produces a voice with his melodious fingers. Just like Orpheus, the composer of Apollonian song is said to have charmed the Thracian beasts, so [Ficino] would be able to calm African lions with his singing and the tigresses which the black Amanus always holds, and he could drag hard rocks off a peak of the Caucasus and the stones concealed by the Sicilian whirlpools.²³⁴

²³³ Bausi 2003b, xxv. See also Maier 1966, 24-71; Bettinzoli 1995, 11-37.

²³⁴ Saepe graves pellit docta testudine curas,
et vocem argutis suggerit articulis;
qualis Apollinei modulator carminis Orpheus
dicitur Odrysias allicuisse feras,
Marmaricos posset cantu mulcere leones
quasque niger tigres semper Amanus habet,

Here the laudatory comparison between Ficino and Orpheus stands on the power of the latter's chant. This was a cliché in the humanists' secular mythology, where Orpheus, traditionally associated with the civilized power of poetry, also came to allegorize the supremacy of art over nature.²³⁵ Similarly, in the *Coronis* of the *Miscellanea centuria prima* (1489), Poliziano reminisces his early (laborious) philosophical training: "and indeed from a very young age I used to apply myself to the study of both philosophical schools under the guide of two excellent men, Marsilio Ficino, whose lyre, much happier than that of the Thracian Orpheus recalled from the underworld the true Eurydice, that is, if I am not mistaken, the Platonic doctrine, of great discernment, and Argyropoulos from Byzantium, among the most important Peripatetics of his time."²³⁶ Here the accent is stressed on the act of retrieval with Ficino's lyre successful where Orpheus's was not. The comparison, though repeated, has undergone a complete reversal of meaning. In fact, I argue that no later than 1480, the certain term before which he ultimated

Caucaseo traheret duras e vertice cautes
saxaque Sicaniis condita gurgitibus

(*Elegia ad Fontium*, 180-188). Translation in Coleman 2012, 256. The composition of the elegy falls at a moment in which Poliziano's fascination with Ficino was at its peak. The first tensions between the two must have manifested themselves probably a few months later when Ficino in a letter stated that "despite the little time available to us in this life, it is of the philologist rather than the philosopher to speak in vain" ("nam in tanta temporis brevitae loqui superflua philologi est potius quam philosophi"[*Ep.* I, 5] quoted in Bettinzoli 2009, 112). At the time Poliziano was a philologist just in the etymological sense of "lover of letters", hence I believe that Ficino's words must be understood more as a means to secure definitely the young Poliziano to his sphere of influence than to provoke or attack him.

²³⁵ See Pyle 1980 with literature.

²³⁶ "Etenim ego tenera adhuc aetate sub duobus excellentissimis hominibus, Marsilio Ficino Florentino, cuius longe felicius quam Thracensis Orphei cithara veram (ni fallor) Eurydicen, hoc est amplissimi iudicii Platoniam sapientiam revocavit ab inferis, et Argyropylo Byzantio Peripateticorum sui temporis longe clarissimo, dabam quidem philosophiae utrique operam" (*Op.* 310).

the *Orfeo*, Poliziano's conception of the myth of Orpheus changed, and he began opposing to the "Orpheus triumphans" a new "Orpheus patiens," with the play as a turning point. A look at the prologue provides some important insights in this direction:

Silence! Listen! There was a shepherd, son of Apollo, called Aristeo. He loved Eurydice, who was the wife of Orpheus, with such an unbridled ardor that one day, while he was following her because of his love, caused her cruel fate: for as she was running away close to the water a snake stung her; and she lay dead.

Orpheus, with his chant, took her out of Hell, but could not honor his word and, poor man, on his way back, turned, so that she was taken away from him again. Hence, he never wanted to love a woman anymore, and women gave him death.²³⁷

Here we can witness a switch of focus in Poliziano's reading of the myth: from mastery of poetry to failure of feelings. The dramatic action is indeed prompted by and revolves around love's labors, as attested also by the striking prevalence of the Ovidian model. In the strict economy of a short prologue, the adjective "miserel" that wipes out Orpheus' heroic dimension, is very likely to be traced back to the "infelix" of *Met.* X, 59 (much more pregnant for position in the verse

²³⁷ Silenzio. Uдите. E' fu già un pastore
figliuol d'Apollo, chiamato Aristeo.
Costui amò con sì sfrenato ardore
Euridice, che moglie fu di Orfeo,
che sequendola un giorno per amore
fu cagion del suo caso acerbo e reo:
perché, fuggendo lei vicina all'acque,
una biscia la punse; e morta giacque.

Orfeo cantando all'Inferno la tolse,
ma non poté servir la legge data,
ché 'l poverel tra via drieto si volse,
sì che di nuovo ella gli fu rubata:
però ma' più amar donna non volse,
e dalle donne gli fu morte data.

All the quotations from the *Orfeo* are taken from the Bausi edition (Bausi 2006).

than Vergil's *Georg.* IV, 454). The reference to the homosexual theme at the end of the same stanza is present only in Ovid's version of the myth and ignored or refused by Virgil²³⁸ (see below). Furthermore, when at the end of the play Orpheus turns and fatally looks at her, it is on love that she blames their cruel fate: "Alas! Too much love lost the both of us. See, I am taken away from you twice and I am not yours anymore. I stretch my arms towards you but with no avail, as I am dragged behind. Farewell, my Orpheus." For Virgil, it was a sudden insanity ("subita dementia," *Georg.* IV, 488) to cause Orpheus to turn his glance, while for Ovid it was an ambiguous mixture of fear of losing and erotic eagerness ("metuens avidusque videndi ~~Met. X, 635) and finally~~ the perfectly crafted metabolic moment of Eurydice's death--perfect as it is a sudden, immediate, and ominous turning point--is at the end of chain of events originated by Aristeo's passionate love for her, a detail not present in Virgil neither in Ovid, where Eurydice is introduced *in medias res*.

The progressive reduction of Orpheus' status from that of a charming semi-god to that of a wretched lover is also betrayed by the strategy that Poliziano adopted in addressing the classical versions of the myth. In the *Georgics* this myth is part of a larger narrative and is functional to the main theme of Book IV,

²³⁸ At *Georg.* IV, 520 Virgil simply affirms that Orpheus refused the love of some Thracian women out of respect for Eurydice. Ovid (*Met.* X, 83-85) is explicit: "He also was the first adviser of the people of Thrace to transfer their affections to tender youths; and, on this side of manhood, to enjoy the short spring of life, and its early flowers" ["ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem in teneros transferre m a iuventam laetitia breve ver et prim os ca
"From now on I shall only pluck the early flowers, the spring of the better sex [i.e. of the young males], when they are graceful and slender: this is a sweeter and more suave love" ("Da qui innanzi vo còr e fior novelli,/ la primavera del sesso migliore,/ quando son tutti leggiadretti e snelli:/ quest'è più dolce e più soave amore" [v. 269-272]). According to Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti, this is "the first explicit exaltation of ephebic love in the Italian vernacular literature" (*Orfeo*, 79).

apiculture: to placate the anger of the nymphs that were Eurydice's playmates in the woods and had avenged their friend with the extermination of the bees, Cyrene invites her son Aristeo to sacrifice some oxen to Orpheus; out of the cattle's rotten carcasses large clouds of bees will buzz and swarm (IV, 531-558). In Ovid, instead, we have a belated happy-ending: "his [i.e. Orpheus'] ghost descends under the earth, and he recognizes all the spots which he has formerly seen; and seeking Eurydice through the fields of the blessed, he finds her, and enfolds her in his eager arms. Here, they walk together side by side and at another time he follows her as she goes before, and again at another time, walking in front, precedes her; and now, in safety, Orpheus looks back upon his own Eurydice" (*Met.* XI, 61-66).²³⁹ In the *Orfeo*, there is no accommodating aftermath and the fate of Poliziano's hero is consumed the moment he declares his preference for ephebic love, causing the wreath of the frenzied Bacchae who tear him into pieces: "Here's the one who despise our love! O, o, sisters! O, o, let's put him to death [...] Through the woods we have torn him apart, so that each brier is sated with his blood. We have dilacerated him piece after piece with cruel torment. Why doesn't he blame on legitimate marriage now?" (*Orfeo*, 293-4; 303-7).²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Umbra subit terras, et quae loca viderat ante,
 cuncta recognoscit quaerensque per arva piorum
 invenit Eurydicen cupidisque amplectitur ulnis;
 hic modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo,
 nunc praecedentem sequitur, nunc praevisus anteit
 Eurydicenque suam iam tuto respicit Orpheus.

²⁴⁰ Ecco quel che l'amor nostro disprezza!
 O, o, sorelle! O, o, diamoli morte!
 [...]
 Per tutto 'l bosco l'abbiamo stracciato,
 tal ch'ogni sterpo è del suo sangue sazio.

The *Orfeo* is an essentially thanatological work, with loss as its turning point and the death of the protagonist as its finale. The ultimate meaning of this death has been baffling for those who have attempted an overall interpretation of the play.²⁴¹ Mario Martelli, arguing that the play stems from the same Neoplatonic milieu of the *Stanze*, sees Orpheus, like Iulo before, fail in his path from imperfection to perfection, and emphasizes Orpheus' inability to overcome carnal desire. In this perspective, that Orpheus turns to the love of young boys would correspond to the lower level of erotic perversion: "Orpheus is incapable of climbing over the second step in the chain of being ["scala dell'essere"], that is that of the *vita activa* (or political life), so that, when he turns backward toward hell, he falls into an existence given to the vilest occupations to end up, eventually, in the abjection of the sin against nature."²⁴² Martelli's analysis is corroborated by the findings of Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti who has provided important evidence to locate the composition of the *Orfeo* in the 1470s, when Poliziano's fascination with Neoplatonism was at its peak. Tissoni Benvenuti herself offers what I might call a thanatological interpretation *avant la lettre*, with a telling reference to the myth of Hippolytus:

Orpheus' struggle against Eurydice's death symbolizes--it is--the struggle for the recovery of the ancient world: Eurydice's resurrection is the resurrection of the ancient world. Orpheus' singing was not sufficient to achieve this retrieval, whereas a long and tenacious study can restore to life the ancient wisdom [...] Thus, other ways to reach to ancient poetry and becoming immortal through its own immortality are available [...]

L'abbiamo a membro a membro lacerato
in molti pezzi con crudele strazio.
Or vadi e biasimi la teda legittima!

²⁴¹ The vast debate that has followed can hardly be reported here in detail. For general recent reviews of the interpretations of the *Fabula di Orfeo*, see Bigi 1982; Puccini 1992; Martelli 1995.

²⁴² Martelli 1995, 88.

especially that of devoting one's own enthusiastic activity to recovering and restoring ancient works, like Orpheus and Hippolyt dilacerated and torn to pieces by envious Fortune or corrupted by the greedy bite of Time.²⁴³

Other scholars, especially those who, following Picotti, have opted for a later composition date, that is in 1480, have argued for an interpretation of the play directly connected to the occasion of its performance.²⁴⁴ As Alessandro Sarti, Poliziano's pupil and editor of the *Cose vulgare* (1494) stated expressly that his master had composed "la festa di Orpheo" in Mantua, Picotti argued that the representation of the *Orfeo* might have taken place in Mantua, adding as a likely date 15 February 1480, on Lent eve. Consequently, for those critics, the *Orfeo* should be understood in a carnivalesque context: "If the performance of the play is to be assigned at the end of the carnival, that is of a festive season that after its very name (*carnasciale*, i.e., carn[el]asciare; *carnevale*, i.e. carne[le]vare) is projected toward the end, the final orgy would acquire the character of a last wildfire before Ash Wednesday, and perhaps its religious import could explain why it was not considered an unseemly play to be performed while the court was in mourning."²⁴⁵

Personally, I am inclined to subscribe to the hypothesis that the composition and performance of the *Orfeo* must be connected to a celebration of

²⁴³ Quoted in Puccini 1992, lvii-lviii. See Carrai 1988b, 13-17.

²⁴⁴ The Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, to whom Poliziano dedicated the play, died on the 23 October of 1483.

²⁴⁵ Puccini 1992, lix. Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti had challenged this chronological indication pointing out that with the death of Margherita Gonzaga, the wife of the ruling duke, a year of mourning was declared starting on 12 October 1479. Therefore, since Poliziano had already returned to Florence in the summer of 1480, there had been no time available for a representation. This assumption, that at the beginning was considered to have settled the issue, has then been put into question. See also Orvieto 2009, 314.

some kind: indeed, even if we deem Alessandro Sarti a not very reliable source, no interpreter, to my knowledge, has challenged the point that the play originated from a festive occasion. Also, once the later date of composition is accepted, I do believe that the *Orfeo* is a Mantuan matter. This does not entail rejecting Martelli's Neoplatonic interpretation in its entirety, which might have well impacted on the *inventio* of the character but which I hardly believe could have been understood in its philosophical implications by the Mantuan public, as cultivated as one can suppose it was. What this very public had certainly perceived, besides the novelty and the stylistic flamboyance,²⁴⁶ was the graphic dismembering of a hero commonly associated with the powerful power of poetry as a consequence of a maddening love. Also, the predilection of the Ovidian reading of the myth over the Virgilian one, was aimed at provoking more than some passing impressions in the native town of the author of the *Georgics* ("Mantua me genuit"). But what is truly Politianesque, I argue, is that the death of the hero leaves no margin for a further elaboration of the myth. As one of the finest critics of Poliziano has written, in the *Orfeo* "Virtue--specifically the virtue of the poet who struggles against fate and death--and Love remain anchored to their earthly dimension and, in so doing, they end up showing wholly and tragically their imperfection and fragility."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Well highlighted in Orvieto 2009.

²⁴⁷ Bigi 1989, 125.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1. “Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas”

In the previous chapters we have discussed the articulations of the thanatological discourse in Poliziano’s oeuvre, namely its impact on his philological enterprise and his poetic invention. But as key component of a *Weltanschauung* emphasizing the limits of human nature and capabilities, it inevitably interfered with Poliziano’s philosophical reflections. In the present chapter, we shall explore these interconnections, bearing in mind Poliziano’s own conceptions of philosophy. Practically deprived of religious or metaphysical import, Poliziano conceived philosophy as a spiritual and intellectual therapy, a remedy for the afflictions of the soul and the limitations of the mind--all pathological phenomena falling in the realm of thanatology. Furthermore, as we shall see later on, philosophical inquiry seldom parted from the philological activity, which Poliziano understood, or better “experienced”, as an encompassing intellectual endeavor. In the first instance, we shall see that philosophy works as remedy, as *phàrmakon*; in the second we shall observe how thanatological negativity affects Poliziano’s practice and conception of philology.²⁴⁸ For the sake of clarity we can define the former relation as an ethical conflict, the latter one as an epistemological conflict.

The privileged standpoint of my analysis will be Poliziano’s reading of Plato and his teaching. The “Athenian old man,” as the humanist called him in the *Lamia*, is indeed his ever-present philosophical interlocutor; also, most of

²⁴⁸ See also the considerations made in the second part of Chapter 1.

Poliziano's late philosophical developments can be best understood against the Platonic backdrop. Plato exerted a great influence on Poliziano's own formation in the 1470s via the mediation of Marsilio Ficino, at the point of epitomizing, together with Socrates, the model of the philosopher as the searcher for truth (Plato was "the light of the restless souls who found in him their own restlessness, of the souls thirsty for an inextinguishable thirst.")²⁴⁹ Also, it was in the framework of Platonism that Poliziano developed most of his own philosophical tenets, especially with regard to the doctrine of the soul and to ethical inquiry.

Nonetheless, Poliziano's Platonic enthusiasm began fading at the end of the 1480s. If at face value this could be said to correspond to the general decline of the Ficinian star in the Medicean circle, especially after Ficino's involvement in the Pazzi conspiracy,²⁵⁰ I shall argue on the other hand that such a waning in interest is to be ascribed to a general discomfort that Poliziano experienced toward the capabilities of philosophy in grasping the truth.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Garin 1942, 22.

²⁵⁰ See Gentile 1980; Fubini 1984 and 1987.

²⁵¹ It is worth here recalling what Eugenio Garin wrote in 1954: "There are no relevant traces of Ficinian Platonism in Poliziano's corpus, although Plato is often present: but it is Plato to be present and not the 'Platonic theology;' and of Plato that character of Socratic morality that could well be connected with Epictetus' teachings" (Garin 1994, 345.) While the first statement is still being discussed in recent scholarship and the last seems a bit far-fetched given the lesser status that Epictetus has in comparison to Plato in Poliziano's oeuvre, Poliziano's cold shoulder toward Ficinian metaphysics and, conversely, his enthusiasm for Socratic Platonism can hardly be underestimated. On the debated issue of the relationship between Poliziano and Ficino, see Bettinzoli 2009, 107-170 with literature.

4.2. The Weapons of Epictetus

The first instance of the conflict between the negative phenomena that we have been investigating through the notion of thanatology and philosophy in Poliziano's writings, can be found in the prefatory letter to the translation of the *Enchiridion* (or *Handbook*) of the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Poliziano wrote this letter in one of the Medicean retreats in Fiesole, where he found shelter after Lorenzo de' Medici's wife, Clarice Orsini, had kicked him out of Cafaggiuolo. The letter is not dated, but it is certainly to be located some time between the late spring of 1479 and 1 August of that year, the date of Poliziano's response to Bartolomeo Scala, who had criticized the work and its author.²⁵² Over that summer, Poliziano attended to the Latin versions of a number of Greek texts, like pseudo-Alexander of Aphrodisias' *Problemata* and Plutarch's *Amatoriae Narrationes*, but the *Enchiridion* seems to have had a special appeal to him: it offered him space for exercising his philological skills; it satisfied his crave for less-known or remote texts; it could be of some practical use.²⁵³ This very last reason made Lorenzo de' Medici, who was the dedicatee of the work, also its practical addressee. As one of his modern biographers wrote, "Lorenzo had never

²⁵² This proves that the *Enchiridion* translation was somehow published during Poliziano's lifetime, even if it was printed only after his death.

²⁵³ On these translations, see Maier 1966, 372-386. The *Problemata* and the *Amatoriae Narrationes*, both dedicated to the humanist Pandolfo Collenuccio did not seem to have enjoyed much circulation while Poliziano was alive but were printed posthumously in the 1498 Aldine. The translation of Plutarch's *opusculum* is now edited in Malta 2004. As for the *Enchiridion*, in the prefatory letter Poliziano explains in some detail the state in which he found the testimonies that helped him reconstruct the text. He must have believed to recall to life a work practically unknown to the humanists, although Niccolò Perotti had translated it in 1450. Still, Perotti's version had little or no audience and Revilo P. Oliver demonstrated that some striking similarities between this and Poliziano's translation are not to be ascribed to Poliziano's plagiarism but rather to the editorial initiative of Filippo Beroaldo the Elder (see Oliver 1957 and 1958).

worked so hard nor faced so many dangers as in the spring and summer of 1479.”²⁵⁴ Pressure came from every front: political, military, and financial. Warfare, plague, the unpredictable games of alliances, the chronic need for money, had all consumed him. In October, in a message to his trusted Florentine ambassador in Milan, Girolamo Morelli, Lorenzo briefly but effectively describes his state of mind: “For the love of God, Girolamo, have compassion of the infinite problems I have, for it is a wonder that I have not lost what little sense I have. I have written to you only briefly for I know that with you there is no need of words, and besides I am so exhausted that I can do no more.”²⁵⁵

If Poliziano could not actually fight on his patron’s side--as we should not forget that in December of that year he refused to accompany Lorenzo to Naples--he was still able to offer his support by helping him win another war, that waged within Lorenzo against the afflictions of his soul. In this regard, the translation was meant to furnish Lorenzo with the weapons of philosophy:

Not from the god Vulcan, like Achilles and Aeneas, but from nature and reason our Epictetus received his weapons, so that they have preserved him safe and sound, not only from darts and sword but also from fear, sorrow, and other perturbations of the soul. This man did not wage a most violent war against the centaurs as that famous Caeneus did, but against fortune and the public opinion. Epictetus vanquished and drove the two of them away so that he extirpated them from men’s whole life.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Hook 1984, 111.

²⁵⁵ “Per l’amore di Dio, Girolamo, acordatevi questo tracto con la volontà nostra et habbiatemi compassione delle infinite brighe che ho, che è maraviglia che io non habbi perduto questo mio poco senno. Scrivovi brieve in questa parte, perché so con voi non bisogna parole et perché sono sì stracho, che non posso più” (Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Lettere*, IV, 233 [trans. Hook 1984]).

²⁵⁶ “Epictetus hic noster, ea non a Vulcano, ut Achilles atque Aeneas, sed a natura ipsa ac ratione arma accepit, quae non modo se a telis et ferro, sed a metu quoque et dolore caeterisque animis perturbationibus tutum inviolabilemque praestiterint. Bellum quidem hic vir non cum centauris, ut ille [*scil.* Caeneus], sed cum fortuna cumque opinione acerrimum gessit. Quas ita ambas fudit et fugavit, ut eas ex universa quoque

Epictetus accomplished this through his very practice of life, where he had shown how to manage what is “in ourselves” (i.e. what is “in our control”) and how not to be distressed by things that are not “in ourselves,” according to the fundamental distinction that opened his *Handbook*:

There are two classes of things: those that are some are in ourselves, and those that are not. In ourselves are opinion [ὀπίληψις], choice, desire, aversion and, in a word, everything that is our own doing; not in ourselves are our body, our possessions, our reputations, our offices and in a word, everything that is not our own doing. The things in ourselves are by nature free, unhindered, unimpeded; the things that are not in ourselves are weak, slavish, hindered, up to others.²⁵⁷

Following Epictetus’ golden rule (“bear and forbear”) Lorenzo had to bear the turns of fate as well as the criticism of his adversaries, and to forbear the blows of passion.²⁵⁸

The combination of clarity and matter-of-factness that over the centuries captivated several of Epictetus’ readers--and notably the most fastidious of them, Giacomo Leopardi--did not fail to excite Poliziano, for whom Epictetus’ (or

hominum vita exterminaverit” (*Op.* 393). Caeneus or Kaineus, mentioned in the first part of the letter, was a nymph turned into a man by Poseidon, and guided the Lapiths against the centaurs (see *Ov., Met.* XII, 198-246; 247-616). Curiously, in the letter Poliziano retells the myth as reported in Pindar (frag. 128), a locus that was used in anti-stoic vein by Plutarch (*Plut., Stoics* 1057 D). For the figure of Caeneus, see Delcourt 1953.

²⁵⁷ Boter 1999, 276 (trans. slightly modified). Poliziano’s version: “Eorum quae sunt partim in nobis est, partim non est. In nobis est opinio, conatus, appetitus, declinatio et, ut uno dicam verbo, quaecunque nostra sunt opera. Non sunt in nobis corpus, possessio, gloria, principatus et uno verbo quaecunque nostra opera non sunt. Quae igitur in nobis sunt, natura sunt libera, nec quae prohiberi impediri possint. Quae in nobis non sunt, ea imbecilla, serva, et quae prohiberi possint, atque aliena” (*Manuale* 69). Some problems may arise with Poliziano’s Latin translation of the Greek “ὀπίληψις” which he renders as “opinio,” whereas he had used the same word “opinio” in the Latin of the prefatory letter arguably to refer to the opinion of others, not one’s own (which is indeed considered as a “thing in ourselves” in the *Handbook*.) Therefore, for purposes of disambiguation, I preferred to translate the word “opinio” in the letter as “public opinion.”

²⁵⁸ Cf *Op.* 393-394: “Sed quod in toto hoc libello pluribus explicatur, id omne Epictetus duobus his verbis, quae etiam frequentissime usurpabat, comprehendere est solitus: ‘Sustine et abstine.’”

better, Arrian's) prose was an example of "powerful and vigorous style, charged with extraordinary persuasive strength."²⁵⁹ In fact, among those not persuaded, was Bartolomeo Scala, the powerful philo-Medicean chancellor of Florence who had had long-standing interest in philosophical matters, producing, among other things, a treaty *On Philosophical Sects* (1458).²⁶⁰

We do not have the actual letter carrying Scala's criticism, but we can infer its content from Poliziano's apologetic response, entitled *Pro Epicteto Stoico Epistola* (dated 1 August 1479.) The three allegations that Scala made against Epictetus were that he was obscure, that he taught things beyond human's capabilities, and that he was mendacious.²⁶¹ As for the first charge, Poliziano understands "obscurity" more as "pointlessness" than as "unintelligibility" as we might expect. In fact, in Poliziano's words, Scala denies that Epictetus had actually explained how his precepts can be of help, and consequently Poliziano

²⁵⁹ "Sermo autem in eo omnino efficax est, atque energiae plenus, et in quo mira sit ad permovendum vis" (*ibid.* 393) Arrian of Nicomedia (85-161/180 CE), Greek historian and Roman politician, was a disciple of Epictetus and transcribed many of his works, among which the *Handbook* in the version carried down to us. In the preface to his translation Leopardi wrote: "it seems to me that the basis and the meaning of this philosophy [*scil.* Stoicism] do not stand, as they say, on the consideration of the strength of man, but on his weakness" (*Manuale* 22). On Epictetus and Leopardi, see Materiale 1982.

²⁶⁰ Bartolomeo Scala (1430-1497) served as chancellor of Florence for thirty-two years, and is credited as he who fostered the reform of the chancery from its medieval structure to a modern office more suitable to the needs of a centralized state (Brown 1979, 329-343). Certainly, his relation with Poliziano was never of friendship but it severely deteriorated in full-blown hostilities in 1493 (*ibid.*, 210-219).

²⁶¹ Cf *Prosatori latini* 912: "Tria autem sunt quae [, Scala,] obicis [...]: quod obscura, quod supra hominis vires, quod falsa praeceperit." The letter is amply discussed in De Pace 2002, 161-174).

will address this criticism at the end of the letter, only once he has shown in details the Stoic philosopher's doctrine.²⁶²

To counter the second of the chancellor's allegations Poliziano chooses the example of the wise man's demeanor in front of the death of his beloved, a *topos* of the humanistic debates on ethics:²⁶³

You say that what [Epictetus] teaches is way beyond human strengths. What do you mean? If you love your son, your wife, tell yourself you love a person: in so doing you will not be shaken by that death. [...] It is then, especially when things are favorable, that we all have to reflect within ourselves on the way to endure the adversity, dangers, losses, and exiles. You should always ponder from where distress comes, whether it is the fault of the son, the death of the wife, the illness of the daughter, and that these things are common, that they might happen, so that nothing is unexpected to the soul and that whatever occurs unpredictably, that can all be counted as gain.²⁶⁴

This answer, one might concede, is hardly persuasive, and Poliziano must have sensed it. The distinction he makes between what Epictetus teaches and what he "too splendidly" promises ("ille deinde nimis magnifice polliceatur") does not make his point firmer. Poliziano is well aware that it is indeed the practicability of Epictetus' precepts that Scala is questioning; and when the latter argues that an impassive attitude like the one described above would be contrary to nature, Poliziano replies:

No one can resist nature: he who opposes her fights the war of the giants against the gods, as they say. In fact, we have read that in the

²⁶² Cf *Prosatori latini* 912: "obscura, ut cum negas explicatum ab eo quatenus tandem nostra sint opera."

²⁶³ See, for instance, Tenenti 1957, 53-58.

²⁶⁴ "At sunt, inquis, ardua nimis supraque hominis vires, quae praecipit. Quidnam id tandem? Si filium, si uxorem amas, dic te hominem amare, mortuo enim non perturbaveris. [...] "Omnes cum secundae res sunt maxime, tum maxime meditari secum oportet, quo facto adversam aerumnam ferant, pericula, damna, exilia; peregre veniens semper cogites, aut filii peccatum, aut morbum filiae, communia esse haec, fieri posse, ut nequid animo sit novum; quicquid praeter spem eveniat, omne id deputare esse in lucro" (*Prosatori latini* 918).

occasion of the death of their most beloved family members, many have abstained themselves from tears and lament, like that famous Solon from Athens, or like Cato the Censor, who both were and were considered wise men. To be sure, these are not easy things to do; still, they are not beyond human strengths.

For Poliziano, then, what appears to be a law of nature ceases to be such if counteracted by the examples offered by human history:

If you allow that this happened in one case or in another, then you will certainly concede that it occurred in many other cases, and I shall recur to that type of demonstration that the logicians call ‘induction,’ used by Socrates in numerous instances in the writings of Plato, the prince of philosophers. [According to this method,] it is necessary that if you conceded that it had happened in act to someone, in the same way do not deny that it exists also in potency in the whole species.²⁶⁵

Poliziano might be right in strictly logical terms but his rhetoric was fallacious: in a public reply to an eminent humanist with some philosophical formation--as is the case of the epistle to Scala--to venture in the swamps of the difference between “the impossible” and the “very difficult” may seem brilliant, while it is not clever, and appealing to Socratic induction to support that distinction can appear clumsy. It is as if all of Poliziano’s persuasive drive had been absorbed in rebuking the third point made by Scala which revolved around Epictetus’ tenet that “the body is not in ourselves.”

²⁶⁵ “Naturae enim nemo resistit, cui qui aduersetur is gigantum more quod dicitur cum diis bellum gerat. Multos autem legimus in carissimorum sibi pignorum obitu lachrymis fletuque abstinuisse, ut Atheniensem illum Solonem, ut Censorem Catonem, qui ambo sapientes et fuerint et sint habiti. Non sunt quidem haec factu facilia; non supra hominis tamen sunt vires” (*ibid.* 920); “si das in uno hoc aut in altero, dabis profecto et in multis, utarque eo demonstrationis generis, quam inductionem dialectici vocent, qua plurima apud Platonem philosophorum principem Socrates utitur, ut necesse sit, cum quidem in uno aut altero homine actu id extitisse concesseris, idem in universa quoque specie virtute saltem facultateque inesse non diffiteare” (*ibid.*)

This is not the place to discuss at length this complex philosophical issue, which has been tackled in greater detail by other scholars.²⁶⁶ What is worth stressing here, instead, is that this is the occasion for Poliziano to make his most original case: the assimilation of Epictetus' Stoicism with Platonism. Poliziano grounds indeed his counter-arguments on Plato's writings and, most importantly, on the *Alcibiades I* (esp. 129c-130b).²⁶⁷ In this dialogue, it is argued that man is soul participating of reason and that the body is not "part" of man but instrument of his soul. In fact, man can dominate the body but the body cannot dominate itself, therefore man cannot be body plus soul, because what dominates cannot be dominated at the same time. Thus, the body is not "in ourselves," as Epictetus had said. This conclusion, resting on a distinction that Scala had deemed "arid and juiceless" but that Poliziano praised instead as "concise and formulated with doctrine and consideration," was "not kept in a hidden place, but was available, within reach for anyone who wished to take it up for himself." Plato had exposed this doctrine and made it known to us: "what indeed is more famous than the famous Plato?"²⁶⁸

The overt reference to Plato betrays Poliziano's agenda. For him, the import of the *Pro Epicteto Stoico Epistola* had to go well beyond the contingency of the polemic with Scala. Poliziano wanted to show that Epictetus's teachings

²⁶⁶ See De Pace 2002, 163-165.

²⁶⁷ References -- with some imprecisions like the mention of the dialogue *Protagoras* at *Prosatori latini* 914 -- are also made to the *Phaedo* (see De Pace 2002, 164).

²⁶⁸ Cf "Cur enim ut aridam succoque carentem divisionem illam vexes, qua ille paucissimis verbis scienter circumspecteque omnia quae sunt suas in partes tribuit, non intelligo"; "at non in adbito hoc erat, sed in promptuario ad manum volenti id sumere, ac praesto erat. Quid enim Platone ipso illustrius?" (*Prosatori latini* 922).

rested on, and indirectly confirmed, those of Plato's.²⁶⁹ To be sure, Epictetus' were cloaked in the most sober and austere style, far from Plato's luxuriant narratives and imagery; they were collected in a handbook, ready at hand as *speculum principis* and not as speculative monuments like Plato's political writings. But both philosophers possessed a familiarity with truth that was central to Poliziano's concerns at that time. It is revelatory, in this respect, a passage in the prefatory letter to Lorenzo, where Poliziano refers the otherwise erratic appellative of "Platonic" to Epictetus: "Arrian, who set free this Platonic, that is, true man, plucked, as if with flowers, from [Epictetus'] books and made a book out of it; and since it is necessary to have this book always at hand, he entitled it 'Enchiridion' that in the military jargon means 'little dagger.'" Along with this very jargon--that had already informed Poliziano's treatment of Epictetus in the prefatory letter--he adds that "as in Homer Ajax the Teucer defends himself with the Clypeus, so our Stoic philosopher audaciously fights with Plato's arguments by using them as a shield." This is a clear reference to what Poliziano had written about Scala earlier in the same letter, that is, that he had set against Epictetus' arguments "the venerable authority of nature, as it were Ajax's famous Clypeus."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ This also serves as a perfect example to illustrate that for Poliziano favoring Plato did not necessarily mean subscribing Ficino's agenda: "as early as in the *De voluptate*, Ficino had declared that the theory of the soul as expounded in the 'Alcibiades I' was unsuitable to represent the authentic Platonic doctrine: by identifying the soul with the actual, terrestrial human being, he objected, one risked to discard what was the most important thing, that is, man's divine nature granted to him by the intellect" (De Pace 2002, 175). See also what Alessandro Daneloni says about the translation of Epictetus' *Enchiridion*: "it signaled an implicit, but not less determined parting from Ficino's Neoplatonic mysticism" (Viti 1994, 316 no. 125).

²⁷⁰ "Arrianus [...] eque eius [i.e. Epicteti] libris, quasi florem quendam, qui hunc Platonicum, hoc est, verum hominem in libertatem vindicaret, excerpserit et in volume

Hardly can one think that the repetition of a classical reference in the same rhetorical context (a counter-argument) and in the same letter is the product of chance; neither can one assume that Poliziano would do such a thing, he who was the champion of stylistic *variatio*. Over-speculation aside, I would argue that here Poliziano is envisaging a parallelism between the two *auctoritates* that he and Scala respectively invoke: Plato and nature. The point here is not to suggest which authority would prevail--which would be just an idle exercise--but rather to highlight the very fact that philosophy is set against nature, the latter as a the source of somewhat negative impulses, and the former as its remedy.

Furthermore, the fact that the general framework of reference are the Platonic writings makes it all the more interesting because, as I shall demonstrate in what follows, over time Poliziano would have shown toward Plato the same bafflement that Scala had voiced in the letter that triggered Poliziano's response in the *Pro Epicteto Stoico*.

4.3. The Athenian Old Man

If over the 1470s and for part of the 1480s Poliziano's view of Plato remained substantially unchanged, it acquired a new, more problematic profile in the early 1490s. It was at a time when, urged by his academic opponents, Poliziano decided to tackle the question of philosophizing. He did so in the *Lamia* that contains his most original treatment of philosophy and of the role of the

redegit..."(Op. 393). "Igitur ut apud Homerum Aiakis se clipeo Teucer defendit, ita et Stoicus his noster sub Platonis rationibus quasi sub clypeo audacter pugnat" (*Prosatori latini* 924). Cf: "Huic tu praecepto naturae augustum nomen, quod maximum, ut physici dicunt, ad omnes affectus momentum habeat, quasi Aiakis illum clypeum obiectas"[*ibid.*, 920]].

philosopher. While in the third chapter of the present study I focused on the *Lamia* in order to argue about the political import of the redefinition of the figure of the philosopher and its role vis-à-vis that of the *grammaticus*-philologist, now it is time to concentrate on the *pars destruens* of that reformulation, that is that part where Poliziano expresses his discomfort with some of the traditional tenets on what philosophy is or should be, allowing us to reconstruct, by contrast, his own ideas on philosophy.

But before embarking on the textual analysis of the *Lamia*, we have to be aware that this oration displays some features that make it not immediately perspicuous: the text is often polyphonic, the main train of thought is at times suddenly interrupted to be either resumed later or just abandoned, and Poliziano's judgments and opinions are far from being clear-cut. Imbued with irony, when not with sarcasm, Poliziano demystifying moves are intrinsically ambiguous, and the reader--or, better, the listener since it is an oration we are talking about here--had to discern carefully which aspects of a certain doctrine are presented as worth following or not.²⁷¹ But it is especially when Poliziano sketches Plato's portrait that this ambiguity reaches its peak: in the *Lamia* the Greek philosopher appears to be the paragon of what a philosopher ought to be and at the same time, at a more careful reading, a somewhat negative example. Still, Poliziano restrains from a frontal attack and articulates his critique along the swift lines of rhetorical association, beginning his revisionist account of philosophical "sects" with Pythagoras. Indeed, as Ari Wesseling stated in the introduction to his edition of the *Lamia*,

²⁷¹ On the use of irony in the *Lamia*, see Wesseling 1986, xxi-xxii.

it just happens that Pythagoras was held in high esteem by Marsilio Ficino and the Neo-Platonist school, a popular movement in the Florence of the day. Ficino admired Pythagoras not only as a precursor of Plato but also as one of the prophets, a tool of Providence, an interpreter of the continuing revelation of the divine mysteries [...]. It looks very much as if in the ‘*Lamia*’ Poliziano is poking fun at the Neo-platonists’ adoration of Pythagoras.²⁷²

Introduced as a “He Himself,” “born often enough, even reborn, [...] noticeable for his golden thigh,” Pythagoras is treated, literally, as a philosophical laughing-stock: “if you hear the precepts of ‘He Himself’ you are going to dissolve with laughter.” The material for laughter is chiefly provided by the *symbola Pythagorica*, a collection of precepts with which Pythagoras urged his disciples, among other things, “to fold up the bedspreads, and wipe out the mark of *their* body” once out of bed and to “not urinate against the sun.” Still, on the part of the disciples, to contradict such solemn commands was out of question, since “as soon as [Pythagoras] took one of those students under his wing, in a flash he took away is power of speech.” Finally, when Poliziano illustrates the episodes of Pythagoras taming the Daunian bear and entertaining himself with the bull of Taranto (*Lamia* § 11), he seems to make that champion of ancient philosophy the lesser hero of some trivial hagiography. Nonetheless, this “professor, a salesman really, of such a revolting kind of ‘wisdom’” considered himself a philosopher, a man studious of a “specific type of knowledge” called “sophia,” that is the study of beautiful, divine, and pure things “passing to and fro through the universe, binding everything together by means of a certain secret beauty, or order.”²⁷³

²⁷² *Ibid.* xvi.

²⁷³ “Femore etiam aureo conspicuum, natus saepius ac renatus. Nomen illi erat ‘Ipse’” (§ 8); “Praecepta vero si Ipsius audieritis, risu, scio, diffluetis” (*ibid.*). “Cum lecto surges, stragula complicato vestigiumque corporis confundito” (§ 9); “ni cachinnos

Here ambiguity unfolds dramatically. One is tempted to ask if and to what extent it is possible to reconcile the extravagant sectarianism and elitism of Pythagoras and his followers, with disinterested contemplation: is the latter tainted and hence fatally spoiled by the former? Or does the latter's nobility justify its questionable practitioners? In commenting on the section on Pythagoras, Ari Wesseling notes that "this description [...] is liberally laced with irony" and "it is not until Poliziano reaches the conversation between Pythagoras and the tyrant of Phlious that the tone becomes serious, namely when the philosopher comes to the subject of the best way of life, one devoted to contemplation."²⁷⁴ Still, there is no plain explanation for this abrupt change of tone and it is apparent instead that Poliziano purposely leaves listener to uncertainty. It is undeniable, on the other hand, that the figure of Pythagoras is so negatively delineated that there seems to be no possibility of restoring his good reputation; therefore, if some good in his teachings has to be found, it is on the extant part of his teachings that our attention must focus: namely on the advantages (and disadvantages) of philosophical contemplation. But unfortunately, no further indication is given in the text: Poliziano does not explain to what the study of what is beautiful, divine, and pure amounts, and he

metuam qui iam clanculum, puto, ebulliunt, habeo aliud quoque quod narrem. Sed narrabo tamen. Vos, ut lubet, ridetote" (§ 11). "Sed eos discipulos, ut ad se quenque receperat, statim prorsus elinguabat!" (§ 8). "Tam portentosae sapientiae professor ac venditor" (§ 13). "Quae per univ[er]sum decurrens et commeans, arcana quodam vel ornata vel ordine cuncta devinciret" (§ 16). On the Pythagorean sayings, see Celenza 2001.

²⁷⁴ Wesseling 1986, 28, *ad* 4,21-6,14; 6,13-14.

shortly thereafter passes to portray Plato, the “old Athenian man,” illustrating what for him was the “image of a true and legitimate philosopher.”²⁷⁵

According to Plato, all philosophers “ought to possess this distinguishing sign, first of all: they are all haters of falsehood and lovers of truth,” a truth which is often the outcome of a collective enterprise:

[Plato] also used to say that the very same person who is zealously looking for truth wants to have as many allies and helpmates as possible for that same pursuit, to be one who understands that the same thing happens in philosophy as in hunting: if someone goes hunting alone for a wild animal, he either never catches it or if he does so, it will be with difficulty; he who summons other humans easily finds the animal’s lair. And therefore in this hunt for truth, as it were, there are many steep, difficult places, enclosed all around with trees and terrifying shadows, on which you alone can shine no light.²⁷⁶

Also, the philosopher ought pursue his goal dispassionately, without hope for or interest in a material reward (“the love of money must also be absent”), be disposed to philosophical self-inquiry, and abstain from strictly judgmental behavior (“really the philosopher will not, in a rather inquisitive and scrupulous way, find out anyone’s secrets [like those we called ‘Lamias’]; and he won’t want to know what goes on behind closed doors in a house and because of this knowledge to be feared”).²⁷⁷ Here, by opposing the multi-centered, collective aspect of the quest for truth to the master-centered, hierarchical one, and

²⁷⁵ Only much further in the text Poliziano will push it at the point of saying that “[philosophy] only frees one for contemplation” ([philosophia] tantum contemplationi vacat” (*Lamia* § 51). See Celenza 2010b.

²⁷⁶ “Porro hunc et ipsum veritatis indagandae studiosum esse et habere quam plurimos eiusdem studii socios adiutoresque velle, scilicet qui norit evenire idem in philosophia quam in venatu: si quis enim feram solus vestiget, is eam vel numquam vel aegre deprehendet; qui venatores advocet alios facile ad ipsum cubile perveniet. Et in hac igitur veritatis quasi venatione loca abrupta confragosaque sunt plurima, arboribus clausa circum atque horrentibus umbris, quae lustrare solo nequeas” (§ 24).

²⁷⁷ “Pecuniarum quoque abesse amor debet” (§ 26). “Sed nec arcana cuiusque curiosius nec scrupulosius (ut ilae quas diximus Lamiae) rimabitur, nec scire volet secreta domus atque inde timeri” (§ 27).

emphasizing how such a quest entails a merely intellectual (and not financial) reward, Poliziano highlights two aspects of the Platonic doctrine that, so to say, “emend” some of the most hideous aspects of the Pythagorean model described above.

Still, at a closer look, in Poliziano’s eyes even the Platonic model has its flaws. The first instance of veiled criticism lies in presenting Plato’s definition of philosopher as a break from an ancient opinion, according to which

men were customarily called wise who cultivated even the mechanical crafts, which is why the inspired poet Homer called even a wood-worker wise. But there was a certain Athenian old man, who was, as they say, tall shouldered. Men thought him full of Apollo. This old man denied that those arts that serve the greater portion of human life are characteristic of a wise man, whether they are arts that are necessary, or useful, or elegant, or related to games, or auxiliary. He said that the real property of the philosopher was the knowledge of numbers. He said that, if you take numbers away from the nature of man, even human reason will perish in perpetuity.²⁷⁸

The contrast between Homer and Plato betrays Poliziano’s intention to criticize, however subtly, the latter’s conception. Indeed, in Poliziano’s view, Homer stands as an inspired wise man (a “vates”) a philosopher on his own, that he held in such a high reputation that in his *Oratio in Expositione Homeri*, delivered in 1485, he

²⁷⁸ “Olim autem, apud saeculum priscum, sapientes appellari consueverant etiam qui sellularias quasdam callebant artes, unde vates Homerus fabrum quoque lignarium sapientem vocat. Sed extitit Atheniensis quidam senex altis eminens humeris, ut aiunt, quem etiam putant homines Apolline satum. Hic sapientis esse negavit eas artis quae plerunque vitae inserviant, sive illae necessariae, sive utiles, sive elegantes, sive ludicrae, sive auxiliares sint. Propriam autem philosophi esse supellectilem dixit numerorum scientiam, quos, inquit, a natura hominis si removeris, etiam ratio perpetuo perierit” (*Lamia* § 17) (translation slightly modified). The Homeric passage Poliziano refers to is the following: “As when a master shipbuilder, who knows/ every skill Athena has to impart,/ stretches a line taut on a new ship’s timber,/ so then the battle lines stretched tight, unbending” (*Il.* XV, 411-414; trans. H. Jordan). Here, “σοφίης” at v. 412, in the sole occurrence of this word in the *Iliad*, is to be rendered as “skill” rather than “wisdom. See also Wesseling’s commentary on this passage at Wesseling 1986, 44-45 especially *ad* 6, 16-17.

could famously affirm: “What shall I say of philosophy, as of which there is almost no great idea or celebrated opinion whose origin we do not recognize in the poet Homer?”²⁷⁹ But it is especially the cause of the disagreement between the two venerable ancient men as expressed in the passage above that contains, *in nuce*, Poliziano’s own doubts toward Plato and, on a more general level, on what his philosophy represents. In the opening of the *Panepistemon*, pronounced the year before the *Lamia*, while speaking of the arts, Poliziano had already taken Homer’s side, expressing himself on behalf of the “lower” ones:

But now I would like to interpret Aristotle’s *Ethics*. In so far as it is possible to do, I will approach this kind of analysis in such a way that not only the fields of learning that are termed liberal or the arts that have to do with machines be gathered together within the boundaries of this classification, *but also those commonly considered low and sedentary which, despite their reputation, are just as necessary for life*. [My emphasis]²⁸⁰

For Poliziano, it is an attention to “life”--or at the very least to its practical dimension--that the Platonic philosophy seems to be lacking and this is why, I argue, in the *Lamia* Poliziano, through a number of allusions, aims at emphasizing Plato’s abstracting inclinations. First, the humanist constructs Plato’s portrait on the basis of the *Epinomis*, a dialogue at the time traditionally attributed to Plato, where the latter is presented as the philosopher of numbers, astronomy, geometry, dialectic, and rhetoric, but whose political works are only

²⁷⁹ “Quid dicam de philosophia, in qua nulla est ferme nobilior posterorum sententia aut opinio celebrata, cuius non in poeta Homero originem agnoscamus” (*Or. Exp. Hom.*, §18, 1-3). See also the *Oratio*’s very incipit: “I shall speak of Homer, the inspired man” (“Dicturus de Homero vate,” §1, 1).

²⁸⁰ “Mihi vero nunc Aristotelis eiusdem libros de moribus interpretanti consilium est, ita divisionem istiusmodi aggredi: ut quoad eius fieri possi, non disciplinae modo et artes vel liberales quae dicuntur, vel machinales, sed etiam sordidae illae ac sellulariae, quibus tamen vita indiget, intra huius ambitum distributionis colligantur” (*Op.* 462) (trans. C. S. Celenza.).

cryptically alluded to.²⁸¹ Second, Poliziano stresses upon the supercilious attitude of some Platonic philosophy, as when he ironically downplays pseudo-philosophical eugenics:

Now, the same old man used to maintain that this sort of a philosopher also has to be the product of a consecrated marriage, that is, that he comes from the best parentage. After all, you can't, as they say, make a statue of Mercury from any piece of wood.

In other sections of the oration, Poliziano remarks on the symbolic value of physicality, as when he recurs to the dichotomy between “high” and “low”:

Branches and young sprouts that are misshapen and crooked can almost never be made straight, even when they are treated and softened by hand; instead they return right away to their natural crookedness. Similarly, those who were neither honorably born nor liberally educated look continuously at the ground. They love certain of the vilest occupations, they never raise their spirits to the sublime, and they are never upright or free

or when he opens and closes Plato's portrait with a seemingly out of context--but which I would rather qualify it as rhetorically estranging--description: “But there was a certain Athenian old man, who was, as they say, tall-shouldered” and “Such was the image of a true and legitimate philosopher that that old Athenian man outlined for us. He stood head and shoulder above everyone else.”²⁸²

²⁸¹ Wesseling has noticed that some fragments of the *Republic* in Themistius' translation are embedded in the text of the *Lamia* (see, for example, *Rep.* VI 485a, or VI, 490a, respectively at Wesseling 1986, 53-54 *ad* 7, 1-5, and 57 *ad* 7, 28-29).

²⁸² “Sed enim talem hunc philosophum nasci etiam affirmabat oportere idem senex e matrimonio sacro, hoc est ex optimis parentibus. Non enim ex omni ligno, sicut dicitur, Mercurius fit. Ut autem rami et surculi pravi tortuosique natura minime unquam redigi ad rigorem suum queunt, quamvis manu tractentur et emolliantur, sed ad naturalem illam statim pravitatem recurrunt, sic hi qui parum nati honeste, parum educati ingenue sunt, continuo ad humum spectant, hoc est, vilissima quaedam ministeria adamant, nec in sublime animos attollunt, nec recti unquam nec liberi sunt” (§ 22); “sed extitit Atheniensis quidam senex altis eminens humeris” (§ 17); “talem nobis igitur veri ac legitimi philosophi adumbravit imaginem senex ille Atheniensis, qui toto vertice ac toto etiam pectore supra ceteros fuit” (§ 28). Wesseling reads the last two passages symbolically as well as I do but reaching an opposite conclusion. Further in the

That in the *Lamia* we are witnessing a change of direction of Poliziano toward Plato can be substantiated through a parallel reading of (and contrast between) the oration with the prefatory letter to Poliziano's translation of Plato's dialogue *Charmides*, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici. In this most interesting document, the pursuit of philosophy, inspired to the Platonic teachings, is presented as the cure for human unhappiness. This is by no means an easy task, "especially for those who do not blush to consider themselves Platonic philosophers." In fact, as Plato says in the *Phaedo* (64c) "one has to die, to have the soul itself removed away from any vicious contact, and almost claim one's right and freedom;" subsequently, one has to pass the examination administered by supercilious *Temperantia*, and to confront a bunch of "chattering, trifling, disgusting, silly, insignificant, petty, envious, haughty people, committed to greed as well as to opulence, who don't consider execrable to handle and taint with their, so to say, filthy hands like those of Harpies', that most sacred name of philosophy."²⁸³ In the fiction of the letter, it is Plato--whom Poliziano incidentally meets on his own way to happiness and whom he calls "the indisputable father of

text, in a typical Politianesque fashion, the humanist will say that the ideal philosopher will "laugh at the man who considers himself so very noble because he counts maybe five or six noble and wealthy men among his ancestors" ("An is [scil. philosophus] non eum deridebit qui se generosissimum putet quod avos quinque forte aut sex nobiles enumeret et divites?") (§ 57).

²⁸³ "Eos qui se philosophi nomine, maximeque Platonici censere non erubescant" (*Op.* 447); "prius quidem emoriantur animumque ipsum ab omni corporis sensu contagioneque avertant et quasi in suum ius suamque libertatem vindicent" (*ibid.*); "complures [...] garrulos, nugaces, putidulos, ineptos eosdem leves, pusillos, invidos, gloriosos, avaritiae luxuriaeque iuxta addictos" (*ibid.*); "philosophorum omnium sine controversia parentem ac deum totiusque sapientiae quasi quoddam, ut aiunt, terrestre oraculum" (*ibid.*) In Poliziano's likely source (Val. Max. 7, 2, ext. 1) these words are referred to Socrates ("Socrates humanae sapientiae quasi quoddam terrestre oraculum"). For the punctuation I have followed the modern text of the *Praefatio*, edited by Hankins 1990, 623-626, no. 64. See also Gentile 1998 with literature.

all philosophers and god of all wisdom almost like an earthly oracle, as they say” - the champion that will plead the good cause of philosophy against those “philosophers’ monkeys” (“philosophorum simiae”). Finally, Poliziano invokes Lorenzo to be the judge in such a trial, inviting him to free his ears and to turn his attention to the Platonic teachings.²⁸⁴

Despite the striking similarities that this prefatory letter and the *Lamia* share--they both discuss the function of philosophy and are structured as a dramatized trial around a title (the “philosophiae nomen”) and against fictitious nasty opponents (the Harpies of the *Prefatio* are obviously reminiscent of the Lamias)--the treatment reserved to Plato in the two works is quite different. Ari Wesseling, to my knowledge the only scholar who has tackled, if only implicitly, the relation between the two works,²⁸⁵ duly annotates their textual analogies but does not remark on their difference of tone; on the contrary it is safe to say that he sees some sort of ideological continuity between the prefatory letter and the oration, as for him “Poliziano also wishes to say that Platonist philosophy is superior to all other philosophical systems.”²⁸⁶

But a look at the chronology of the *Praefatio* discourages us from affirming this continuity. If the date *post quem* that James Hankins proposed, i. e. 1473, seems to be commonly accepted²⁸⁷, the date *ante quem* is more

²⁸⁴ Cf *Op.* 448: “vacuas philosopho aures intentumque animum, quantum in te est, paulisper accomoda.”

²⁸⁵ See Wesseling’s commentary *ad* 6, 16-19; 7, 7-8; 8, 13-14.

²⁸⁶ Wesseling 1986, 61. But on the concept of philosophical system and its application to Early-Modern philosophy, see Catana 2005.

²⁸⁷ This hypothesis is based in the fact that in the *Praefatio* “Poliziano speaks of Lorenzo as ‘ruling the state with wisdom’, as having recalled Philosophy once again ‘in patriam’ and calls him the ‘optimus academiae patronus’; the preface must, then, date

controversial: the same scholar has argued that Poliziano's translation of the *Charmides* (and hence of the letter that accompanies it) is one of the many works that he had left interrupted when he was abruptly kicked out from Cafaggiuolo by Clarice Orsini in the Spring of 1479.²⁸⁸ More recently, Sebastiano Gentile, basing his argument on, among other elements, on the relation between Ficino's epistolary and Poliziano's *Elegia ad Fontium*, has suggested a date falling between mid 1473 and the early 1474.²⁸⁹ Whatever interpretation we may subscribe to, both scholars offer good evidence that the *Praefatio* and the *Lamia* are quite distant in time and that, for what matters here, they belong respectively to two very different moments of Poliziano's career. I would venture to explain their remarkable similarities with the fact that the text of *Praefatio* was as a sort of *Ur-Text* of the *Lamia*: indeed, as the *Praefatio* was neither published during Poliziano's lifetime nor ever alluded to by contemporary witnesses, it is well possible that he kept it as a draft and later transposed part of its material into the *Lamia*.²⁹⁰

A particularly telling example of how in this operation of textual transposition certain material was used in order to pursue very different goals is a

from the period after Lorenzo restored the University of Pisa, that is, after 1473" (Hankins 1990, 449-450).

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 449-451.

²⁸⁹ Gentile 1998, esp. 380.

²⁹⁰ The *Praefatio* to Plato's *Charmides*, together with a fragment of the translation of this dialogue was first published in the 1498 Aldine edition of Poliziano's *Opera omnia* edited by Alessandro Sarti. Sebastiano Gentile suggested that the contentions which might have arisen between Poliziano and Ficino on the interpretation of Platonism in a moment in which Ficino was establishing himself as the philosophical guide of Lorenzo de' Medici, could be the reason why neither the translation, nor its preface were published *vivente Politiano* (Gentile 1998, 381).

passage to which minimal or no attention has been paid so far; a passage that was included in the *Praefatio* to be then repeated almost *verbatim* in the *Lamia*:

If we do not pursue philosophy, guide to our whole life, which (as that famous man said [Cic. *Tusc.* 5, 2, 5]) searches into virtue and expels vices and that was sent by the immortal god from heavens to the earth as a gift to lead and direct man, we will certainly never be able to shine bright in the pure light or to pluck out the pearl with our own strengths (as they say) or to free ourselves by any means from the spells of this human life that turns us, like Circe's poison, in wild beasts. *To speak the truth* [verumenimvero], *as the old saying goes, just as you can't certainly make a statue of Mercury from any piece of wood*, not any nature is allowed to have access in the innermost recesses of philosophy. In that book entitled 'The Republic,' Plato not unlawfully banished those whose character is base and sordid and given up to the desire of the lowest things from the threshold of holy philosophy, as if they were profane and in the smallest degree suitable for pursuing it (*Praefatio* [Op. 447.])

Now, the same old man [scil. Plato] used to maintain that this sort of a philosopher also has to be the product of a consecrated marriage, that is, that he comes from the best parentage. *Indeed* [enim], *you can't, as they say, make a statue of Mercury from any piece of wood*. Branches and young sprouts that are misshapen and crooked can almost never be made straight, even when they are treated and softened by hand; instead, they return right away to their natural crookedness. Similarly, those who were neither honorably born nor liberally educated look continuously at the ground. They love certain of the vilest occupations, they never raise their spirits to the sublime, and they are never upright or free (*Lamia* § 22.) [My emphasis in both passages.] ²⁹¹

²⁹¹ "Nisi enim philosophiam ipsam totius vitae ducem et virtutis, ut ille inquit, indagatricem atque expultricem vitiorum assequamur, quae immortalis dei munere e coelo in terras ad regendum gubernandumque hominem demissa est, numquam profecto nobis vel pura in luce refulgere vel preciosam illam margaritam nostro (ut aiunt) Marte eruere, vel ab humanae huius vitae illecebris, quae nos Circae poculi instar in feras bestiasque convertunt, ullo pacto evadere licebit. Verumenimvero ut non ex omni ligno, veteri proverbio, Mercurius fingitur, ita profecto non cuiusvis naturae est intima philosophiae adyta penetrare. Qui enim animo angusto sordidoque essent rerumque humilium cupiditatibus mancipato, eos Plato in eo quem 'De Republica' inscripsit libro a sacrosanctae philosophiae limine, ceu profanos quosdam atque ad eam capessendam minime idoneos, non iniuria ablegavit" (Op. 447). "Non enim ex omni ligno, sicut dicitur, Mercurius fit. Ut autem rami et surculi pravi tortuosique natura minime unquam redigi ad rigorem suum queunt, quamvis manu tractentur et emolliantur, sed ad naturalem illam statim pravitatem recurrunt, sic hi qui parum nati honeste, parum educati ingenue sunt, continuo ad humum spectant, hoc est, vilissima quaedam ministeria adamant, nec

To be sure, in both cases Poliziano refers the proverb to the impossibility to pursue happiness without philosophizing but its gnomic value is directed toward two different goals. In the first passage, it bespeaks of a status that must be changed through some sort of activity on the part of the philosophizing subject (see, for instance, the “purgation” passage from the *Phoedo* quoted above) while in the second it represents a condition that “almost never” (“minime unquam”) can be changed; it is as if a pragmatist view of philosophy is opposed to an essentialist one. This conclusion is also suggested by the very position that the old saying has in the argumentation: in the first case, there is an invitation to philosophizing, what we might see as a gesture of extension; in the second, conversely, there is a gesture of restriction, as one must possess certain requirements in order to philosophize. This distinction is made clearer, in my opinion, by the fact that in the first passage the proverb is introduced by an adverb with concessive value (“verumenimvero”), while in the second it is introduced by a conjunctive adverb (“enim”). Finally, we should not forget that in the first passage is Poliziano who is speaking directly to Lorenzo and to a potential community of letter readers in the humanistic fashion, but in the second is Plato’s opinion as recounted by Poliziano. In conclusion, what appears to be a minimal detail tells instead of a crucial difference: whereas man’s dedication to the Platonic philosophy is the core of the *Praefatio* (and of the translation of the *Charmides*) as well as the reason why Poliziano invites Lorenzo to embrace Plato as philosophical guide, in the *Lamia*, instead, Platonic

in sublime animos attollunt, nec recti unquam nec liberi sunt” (*Lamia* § 22). According to the point I am emphasizing in the text, I have slightly changed the translations.

philosophy is one of the many possible modes of philosophizing, and one that appears to Poliziano as basically impracticable.

But the most apparent of Poliziano's criticisms toward Plato occurs when he recounts the "myth of the cave." This myth was best known in Plato's version, but Poliziano tells it in the version of the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus, "whom the consensus of ancient Greece is accustomed to call 'most divine.'"²⁹² Now, the two versions are practically identical in content, therefore I argue that by choosing Iamblichus over Plato, Poliziano was furnishing his audience with an authorial indication rather than expressing a textual preference. In addition, Poliziano shies away from interpreting the macro-allegory of the cave and limits himself at privileging the political reading (the philosopher as guide) over the speculative one (the Theory of Forms), doing the opposite of what he had done when in the *Lamia* he introduced Plato for the first time. Then he concludes:

I will suggest this much: those who were bound in the darkness were none other than the crowd and the uneducated, whereas that free man, liberated from his chains and in the daylight, is the very philosopher about whom we have been speaking for a time. I wish I were he! For I don't fear the envy and possible slander that might come with the title, or at least not so much that I wouldn't want to be a philosopher, *were it allowed*. [My emphasis]²⁹³

Poliziano's wishful thinking is justified by the fact that the alternative to the models of philosophizing symbolized by Pythagoras or Plato is itself

²⁹² "Quem veteris Graeciae consensus vocare divinissimum solet" (*Lamia* § 58). The myth of the cave is narrated in Plato's *Rep.* 514a-520a. Iamblicus (ca. 250-330 CE) was the founder of the Syrian Neoplatonic school. His major work is a compendium of the life of Pythagoras.

²⁹³ "Nunc illud tantum admonebo: vinctos in tenebris homines nullos esse alios quam vulgus et ineruditos, liberum autem illum clara in luce et exemptum vinculis, hunc esse ipsum philosophum de quo iamdiu loquimur. Atque utinam is ego essem! Non enim tam metuo invidiam crimenque nominis huius ut esse philosophus nolim, si liceat" (*Lamia* § 67) (translation slightly modified).

problematic. Just before narrating the myth of the cave, Poliziano had sketched the ideal philosopher and had endowed him with some disconcerting qualities. For him, the ideal philosopher is “unsophisticated”, detached from the political world (“he doesn’t know the city’s laws, decrees, and edicts”) and from his own neighbor (“he doesn’t know if he is white or black, man or beast”), aloof and uninterested (“if somebody strikes the philosopher with some reproach, he is mute, silent, he has absolutely nothing to say”). In the same rhetorical fashion as in the passage examined above, it is again the common opinion who is listing all these qualities and, in a tone between confession and embarrassment, Poliziano assents and admits (the verb used is indeed “fateor”[to confess]): “What I will say to these things? How to respond? I certainly admit that they are truer than true.”²⁹⁴ Again, we are presented with a flawed ideal, a model that reinstates that detachment between philosophy and life that in Poliziano’s eyes was at work in Plato’s conceptions. As Christopher Celenza writes: “Who, indeed, could possess all of those qualities? Poliziano seems to defend the ideal mission of philosophy and to endorse all the qualities that an ideal philosopher should possess, even as he implies strongly that such a figure cannot in reality be found.”²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ “At est philosophus homo rudis et secors” (§ 52); “leges, decreta, edicta civitatis ignoret” (*ibid.*); “nec vicinum quidem suum cognoscit, nec scit utrum sit albus an ater, utrum sit homo an bellua” (§ 53); “si quis eundem convicio feriat, tacet, mutus est, nihil habet omnino quod respondeat” (§ 54); “quid ad haec dicam? Quid respondebo? Equidem cuncta esse fateor veriora veris” (§ 55).

²⁹⁵ Celenza 2010b, 38. Earlier in the text he says: “as Poliziano moves on, it becomes even clearer that this idealized philosopher is no bad thing...on the level of the ideal. The problem is that it is well nigh impossible to find anyone who measures up the ideal” (33).

4.4. Philology as Philosophy

It should be clear at this point that the discursive strategies that Poliziano employs in his criticism of Plato do not amount to an open doctrinal disagreement, but rather to a form of an intellectual resistance directed toward an idea of philosophy as lofty enterprise, allegedly epitomized by Plato and his teachings. I argue that this resistance ultimately comes from a conception of life that over the years had become more and more dramatic and that was fatally overcome by negative forces. In the *Lamia* the impasse between the idea of philosophy as *phàrmaikon* and a tragic conception of life becomes definitive. Moreover, as for the function of philosophy, the question seems to remain open after Poliziano's rejection of the title of philosopher to embrace that of *grammaticus*-philologist. In the third chapter of this study we argued that this very move allowed him to overthrow the accusations of the *Lamias* and to lay the foundation of a new professional figure:

I confess I am an interpreter of Aristotle, not a philosopher. I mean, if I were the interpreter of a king, I wouldn't for that reason, consider myself a king [...] But isn't Philoponus, that student of Ammonius and fellow student of Simplicius, a worthy interpreter of Aristotle? And yet no one calls him a philosopher, everyone calls him a philologist.²⁹⁶

That position opened a new scenario, where a comparison was made not among different styles of philosophizing, as in the first part of the oration, but between philosophy and philology. To understand the relation between these two

²⁹⁶ "Ego me Aristotelis profiteor interpretem. Quam idoneum non attinet dicere, sed certe interpretem profiteor, philosophum non profiteor. [...] An non Philoponus ille Ammonii discipuli Simpliciique condiscipulus idoneus Aristotelis est interpres? At eum nemo philosophum vocat, omnes grammaticum" (*Lamia* §§ 69-70). Philoponus (c. 490-570 CE), Ammonius (c. 435/445-517/526), and Simplicius (c. 490-560 CE) were all commentators of Aristotle of Neoplatonic persuasion.

activities one must think that Poliziano conceived them as two disciplines that are strictly intertwined and that both aim at answering, with their own modalities, the question of truth. In a generally overlooked passage of his *adnotationes* on Statius' *Silvae* (1479-1480), Poliziano offers some insights in their relationship.²⁹⁷ The occasion, as often, is prompted by one of the many disagreements between him and Domizio Calderini on a controversial passage of the *Silvae*. This time Poliziano decides to turn one of his hundreds philological observations in a lesson on method. The solemn address to the students that opens the passage suggests that it was written to be read aloud, quite an extraordinary feature for a collection of notes. In the first part Poliziano repudiates the authority principle:

In my opinion, my dearest listeners and comrades, nothing impedes our minds and our studies in so high degree as the fact of seeking for the weights of authority rather than those of reason. Indeed, we cease to recur to our own judgment and deem as true what has been judged as such by that authority that we approve, and we very frequently fall in the worst of errors, that is in giving our assent to what is either false or unknown. Hence, it often happens that at the most incompetent period of life, tied by the precepts of those that affirm to be masters, we set forth something that we consider worth considering but that we have not yet sufficiently understood, and cling as to a rock to whatever theory we are carried to by stress of the weather.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ With the important exception of Branca 1983, 167-169, who discusses this section eminently *sub specie philologiae*, whereas my interest is to show how for Poliziano it represents a broader discussion about the quest for truth and its forms.

²⁹⁸ "Equidem ita mea est sententia, amantissimi auditores et commilitones mei, nihil tantopere ingeniis studiisque nostris officere quam si autoritatis potius quam rationis momenta quaeramus. Nam et desinimus nostrum iudicium adhibere idque ratum habemus quod ab eo, quem probamus, iudicatum videmus, et in unum maximum vitium persaepe incidimus, ut aut falsis aut incognitis assentiamur. Itaque saepe usu venit ut infirmissimo tempore aetatis, eorum, qui docere se profitentur, legibus astricti, aliquid nobis tuendum proponamus, quod nondum satis quale sit intelligamus, et ad quancunque disciplinam quasi simus tempestate delati, ad eam tamquam ad saxum adhaerescamus" (*Comm.Silv.* 90-91). The passage is a partial reprise Cic. *Ac.* 2.8-9, hence I based my translation on H. Rackham's Loeb version. On this passage see also De Pace 2002, 143-144.

It is from the passage immediately following that one infers that Poliziano's refusal of the authority principle does not have the mere function of cautioning his students from the influence of mendacious teachers (and in this respect, the disagreement with Calderini seems little more than a rhetorical pretext). Rather, it reflects a philosophical position, as it derives from the ontological impossibility to found truth on human opinions, that is, on opinions formulated by a subject affected by sensible limitations: "Indeed, as Democritus used to say, truth lies at the bottom, and either because of the obscurity of things themselves or for the feebleness of our own judgments, nothing more can be done to bring it forth as if to fetch it out from where it lies, than to give our assent to opinions that have been formed beforehand."²⁹⁹ Poliziano makes no exception to this principle and adds, in Greek, a section from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* where he states:

But perhaps it is desirable that we should examine the notion of a Universal Good, and review the difficulties that it involves, although such an inquiry goes against the grain because of our friendship for the authors of the Theory of Ideas. Still perhaps it would appear desirable, and indeed it would seem to be obligatory, especially for a philosopher, to sacrifice even one's closest personal ties in defense of the truth. Both are dear to us, yet 'tis our duty to prefer the truth.³⁰⁰

To be sure, it is the philosophers who are most exposed to the epistemological risks inherent to the principle of authority, but Poliziano the encyclopedist cannot fail in highlighting that the efforts in the search for truth

²⁹⁹ "Latet, enim, ut Democritus aiebat, in fundo veritas vel ipsarum rerum obscuritate, vel iudiciorum nostrorum infirmitate nihilque magis ad eliciendam et tanquam expromendam illam facere potest, quam si praeiudicatis opinionibus minime accesserimus" (*Comm. Silv.* 91). Democritus' opinion is taken from Cic. *Ac.* 1.44.

³⁰⁰ *Eth. Nic.* 1096a, 11. Trans. Rachkam.

involve all those who deal with the “good arts” (“bonae artes”), and first of all the philologists:

And not to mention the fact that the philosophers themselves not only are arranged in their different sects with different opinions, but they fight for truth almost in single combats, doesn't the same thing happen in all the good arts? Please consider, I beg, the philologists, the dialecticians, the orators, the physicians, the astronomers, and all the other authors of the liberal arts: certainly in their writings you shall find many more arguments attacking others than defending them. Contentious dispute, as Aristotle writes [*Probl.* 916b, 19], greatly sharpens the mind.³⁰¹

It is safe to say that by the turn of the 1470s Poliziano's intellectual constellation is dominated by a quest for truth that has philosophy and its methodologies as its principal point of reference. Still, seeking truth is not a task exclusive of the philosopher, as he shares it with the other “bonae artes.” In this perspective, philosophy and philology, as well as the other arts, are parallel disciplines, since they both point at the truth even if they move on different tracks. But in the *Lamia*, as we have seen, these two tracks suddenly diverge: one, that of philosophy, is abandoned to its lofty and dubious glory. Philology, instead, is radically embraced, at the point of constituting Poliziano's new identity.

In the end, the truth is that what is at stake here is not the struggle of philosophy vs philology. In fact, in the *Panepistemon*, the prolusion the 1490-1491 academic year, Poliziano designed a comprehensive system of the arts, where philology is included in the subdivision of the philosophical disciplines. Poliziano distinguishes three types of philosophy: theoretical, practical, and

³⁰¹ “Ut omittam quod philosophi ipsi non solum in suas diversarum opinionum sectas distributi sunt, sed et singuli paene cum singulis pro veritate digladiantur, nonne idem tandem in omnibus bonis artibus tenor est? Inspicite, quaeso, grammaticos, dialecticos, oratores, medicos, astrologos, ceterosque liberalium disciplinarum autores [*sic*]: multo profecto plura in eorum libris contra alios quam pro se ipsis invenietis. Contentiosa enim illa disputatio, ut Aristoteles scribit, magnopere ingenium exacuit” (*Comm. Silv.* 91-92).

rational.³⁰² The latter “explains or narrates or demonstrates or persuades or entertains. From it, grammar, history, rhetorics and poetics derived.”³⁰³ In this perspective, philology in its widest meaning is a form of philosophy. Therefore, according to what he says in the *Lamia*, Poliziano leaves behind theoretical and practical philosophy, that is, metaphysics and ethics (*pace* Kristeller). To be rejected, then, is not philosophy as such, but the idea that philosophy can actually grasp some universal truths. It is as if, over the years--that is from the commentary to Statius’ *Silvae* onward--Poliziano had progressively circumscribed the realm of philosophy, up to a point where he realized the incommensurability between human speculation and the goals of some “parts” of philosophy. He never said it so icastically as in the *Praelectio de dialectica* (1490-91), the prolusion to the course on Aristotle’s logical works, where Poliziano, while discussing Platonic dialectic, states:

a dispute [therefore] has arisen among philosophers as to whether dialectic is part or instrument of philosophy or, as Boethius argued, the two things together. In fact, this Platonic dialectic may have seemed remote to many, perhaps even too difficult. Therefore, I believe we shall accomplish something worth of the labor, if we bring down on the ground, as if from a pedestal, the oration that I undertook, that is, if we sink deeper into our work’s own features.³⁰⁴

³⁰² See Celenza 2010, 12. The *Panepistemon* was published in February 1492 by Miscomini in Bologna (*Mostra*, 104 no. 118). Despite the importance of the work, the bibliography is meager: see Dionisotti 1968; Pereira 1974; Brancacci 1993; Mandosio 1996.

³⁰³ “Rationalis aut indicat, aut narrat, aut demonstrat, aut suadet, aut oblectat. Unde grammatica, historia, dialectica, rhetorica et poetica emerserunt” (*Op.* 463).

³⁰⁴ “Nata inde contentio inter philosophos est, philosophiae ne pars, an instrumentum dialectica sit, an (quod Boethius existimavit) utrumque. Verum Platonica ista remota nimis, nimisque etiam fortassis ardua quibusdam videri poterit. Itaque operae precium, credo, faciemus, si institutam orationem quasi de fastigio deducamus in planum, hoc est, si ad ea quae sunt instituti operis propria descendamus” (*Op.* 529). This famous quote is the keystone to most anti-Platonic interpretations of Poliziano, see for instance Garin 1994, 340 [but 1961]. For a radically different approach, see Robichaud 2010, 169-173.

The verbs Poliziano employs (*deducare in planum* and *descendere*) betray a mindset where speculation on lofty realities is ruled out.

In conclusion, it should be clear by now clear that the dichotomy with which I opened this final part has nothing to do with the merits or the demerits of either discipline, but only with the actual practicability of their respective methods. The famous allegory in chapter IV of the first Miscellany (1489), where the Greek Homeric scholar and grammarian Aristophanes, embodies philology and the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes philosophy, only possesses a programmatic value that is too generic an indication to undo the knot between the two disciplines and, if we want to push things a bit farther, it might rather look as a statement authorizing a vision of philosophy as *ancilla philologiae*:

He who wants to interpret the poets should work, as they say, not only by the lamp of Aristophanes but also by that of Cleanthes. And he should take into account not only the schools of philosophers, but also those of jurisconsults, as well as those of medical doctors, of logicians, and of all those disciplines that make up that circle of learning that we call ‘encyclia’, but also those of all philologists.³⁰⁵

It is hard to say if this disciplinary reversal is the product of a skeptical philosophical position, because Poliziano is not voicing a total epistemological impasse: in other words, he is not a Pyrrhonist. He is rather affirming that knowledge is accessible as the result of a “grammatical” approach, that is as

³⁰⁵ “Qui poetarum interpretationem suscipit, eum non solum (quod dicitur) ad Aristophanis lucernam, sed etiam ad Cleanthis oportet lucubrasse. Nec prospiciendae autem philosophorum modo familiae, sed et iureconsultorum, et medicorum item, et dialecticorum, et quicunque doctrinae illum orbem faciunt, quae vocamus encyclia, sed et philosophorum [*Ald*: philologorum] quoque omnium” (*Op.* 229). In the translation I adopt the variant “philologorum” of the Aldine, since the reading “philosophorum” of the Basel edition sounds redundant with “philosophorum modo familiae.” For a different reading of this passage see Murphy 1997, 194, who puts a period after “encyclia” hence considering “sed et philosophorum” the beginning of a new sentence.

activity on a text. Philology is the only epistemological viable possibility.

Philology ends being, for him, the philosophy of the limit.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the Introduction, one of the main goals of this study is to provide the material necessary material to create a new portrait of Poliziano. I will now present this material in a more schematic form, so that the reader can more easily understand the nature of my contribution to the field of Poliziano studies. Before doing this, it is necessary to clarify some methodological points, especially with regards to the category of “thanatology.”

The idea for the present study originated with the observation that the experience of the negative is central to Poliziano’s intellectual achievements. The emphasis on the most harsh aspects of the human condition, the obsessive recurring of the idea of loss, the representation of illness and death as key meaning-producing devices, a penchant for the horrific, all contribute to the creation of a pessimistic *Weltanschauung*. In order to synthesize these elements and their numerous articulations, I employ the interpretive framework of thanatology, which is literally a discourse on death, one that stems from Poliziano’s self-fashioning as the physician (and necromancer) Aesculapius. Poliziano likens his philological activity of reconstruction, and afterwards of the revitalization, of texts, to Aesculapius’ attempts to recompose and restore to life the body of Hippolytus. “Philology as thanatology” therefore signifies that philological activity itself is put under the spell of death, i.e., of the negative.

Thanatology is a unifying framework that permits the reading of an intellectual experience of the past from that standpoint. However, it is not an anachronistic category as it does not attempt to introduce modern notions into fifteenth-century mentality. At the same time, one should not think it constitutes

an all-encompassing hermeneutics. Since bringing together diverse and seemingly disparate elements such as existential anxiety, the loss of antiquity, representations of death, aesthetics of pathos, and a skeptical frame of mind under the same umbrella could prove problematic, this study instead relies upon the concept of thanatology in order to provide a coherent analysis. The coherence that any analysis of this sort offers, its unifying quality, can sometimes be compromised by the disadvantage of losing depth for breadth. In order to avoid this problem, I have elaborated upon certain nuances of meaning that thanatology assumes in reference to a given topic, as I shall explain in more detail in each section of this conclusion.³⁰⁶

Finally, to understand fully my methodology, one should bear in mind that “thanatology” is, chiefly, a mode of reading an intellectual experience affected by the obsession with loss and limitations. As such, thanatology is not a strictly descriptive category but an heuristic one: this means that its function is that of an heuristic lens, not its final conclusion. Secondly, “thanatology” is not a philosophy *per se*, even if it is here used as a way of reflecting on Poliziano’s philosophical tenets.

Poliziano “Grammaticus”

Aldo Scaglione’s 1961 article illustrates Poliziano’s conception of the “grammaticus” and emphasizes its connections with what is commonly

³⁰⁶ With the exclusion of the paragraph on Poliziano “grammaticus,” as the corresponding chapter, mostly biographical, has as its main scope to provide the reader with a detailed frame of reference.

recognized as the philologist.³⁰⁷ Today, scholarship consistently indicates authors and texts that Poliziano, in his activity as philologist, rediscovered, amended, reconstructed, and assimilated in his works as poet. These studies, as well as Scaglione's, belong to the historiography of classical humanist scholarship.

What I aim to highlight in Chapter 2 is, instead, the sociological dimension of Poliziano's work as "grammaticus." I argue that when he decides to appropriate this appellation from Quintilian and to make it the rubric under which he subsumes the various activities carried out as textual critic, he aims at giving shape to a profession that was still in need of definition.

To be sure, the professor of "poetry and rhetoric," as Poliziano himself was, was hardly a new feature in medieval universities. But the innovative idea of making the study of classical scholarship a consequence of political action (what elsewhere I called "philologia instrumentum regni"), entailed the identification of a new intellectual figure. The close connection between the classroom and the "palazzo" was most likely to become a reality in a city like Florence whose politics were dominated by a leading intellectual and Poliziano's intimate ally, as could be found in Lorenzo.

This alliance stood on Latin rather than on vernacular grounds. Poliziano was certainly aware that by defining himself as "grammaticus" he was pointing in the direction of Latinity, "grammatica" was named the very study of Latin by longstanding tradition. Furthermore, if it has long been accepted by scholarship that these two Tuscan humanists should be credited with the revival of vernacular Italian literature, Poliziano's philological workshop, in particular, bore the fruit

³⁰⁷ Scaglione 1961.

that would eventually re-launch Florence's reputation as center of the *studia humanitatis*.

In order to strengthen that new identity, Poliziano strove to create a network, an "ordo," of classical scholars that would give an extra-municipal dimension to what he was doing in Florence, a network of connections that had its "list of contributors" in his *Liber epistolarum*. Poliziano's untimely death and the politically critical situation of Florence in the 1490s shattered the project of this early "republic of letters" but, quite interestingly, this initiative was taken up on the other side of the Alps.

Poliziano and the (anti-)Idyll

Scholars have traditionally characterized Poliziano's poetic production as idyllic. His poetry has been analyzed according to the features typical of the idyllic genre, which are derived mostly, but not exclusively, from pastoral literature and from its classical Teocritan and Virgilian models. In general terms, the pastoral entails the creation of a fictive world where the beauty of nature is celebrated, the distress of daily life forgotten, and death is forbidden. These features can certainly be observed in the two major vernacular works of Poliziano, namely the *Stanze per la giostra* and the *Fabula di Orfeo*. Over time, probably because of the scant attention that critics have paid to Poliziano's Latin works, which display a much larger variety of style themes and style, the idyllic has become synonymous with poetry, and the picturesque character of idyll with beauty.

In Chapter 3 I challenge this view, arguing that the representation of the idyll for Poliziano was just the means to attaining a more comprehensive aesthetics. In my reading, it is the very destruction of the idyll that creates the poetic effect. Illness and death are the agents of such destruction, and usually coincide with the reversal of fortune, one of the typical modes of the production of pathos according to classical rhetoric.³⁰⁸ I show that Poliziano makes extensive use of this technique that I have defined as a “metabolic device”, that is the abrupt interruption of a narrative, through an action tragically affecting the protagonist of that narrative.

I analyze three of Poliziano’s Latin and vernacular works, where death plays a key role in the metabolic device. In the *Epicedion in Albieram*, a literary genre commonly occasioned by the very event of death, pathos is constructed by a long and elaborate description of the illness affecting the young bride Albiera which eventually will lead her to death. This is specifically achieved through an expansion and re-organization of the poetic material pertaining to the tradition of the *consolatio*, and especially of Statius’ consolatory poems. In *Stanze per la giostra*, I see the departure of Simonetta, which is commonly regarded as the turning point in the ascensional Neoplatonic structure of the work, as the tragic outcome of a failed quest on the part of her lover, Iulo. A similarly hopeless enterprise is at the core of Poliziano’s *Orfeo*. Here, again, I have discarded the idea of a Neoplatonic background, viewing instead an Ovidian, and broadly speaking, erotic background.

³⁰⁸ This is also attested by the glosses Poliziano left on his Virgilian incunabulum grounded on Macrobius’ comments to the Augustan epic poet.

In general terms, I believe that time is ripe to revisit the Neoplatonic influence on Poliziano's poetic production. Far too often scholars have believed that the inspiration behind Poliziano's writings of the 1470s had to be found in the Ficinian cultural milieu. This is due mostly to two reasons. First, the tenets as well as the language of the Neoplatonic philosophy were the cultural avant-garde of the Florentine intellectual milieu in the third half of the fifteenth century, with its main exponents, like Poliziano, in contact with Lorenzo de' Medici. Thus, it was inevitable that the ideas and oftentimes the vocabulary of Neoplatonism influenced the literary production of the intellectuals at the Medici's court. This phenomenon, known as interdiscorsivity, runs the risk that the interpreter may detect a likely but in fact non-existing relation between a certain text and cultural context.³⁰⁹ Secondly, the Neoplatonic framework, that informs Mario Martelli's interpretation of Poliziano's early years, is the only consistent and comprehensive interpretation that scholars have provided for both the *Stanze* and the *Orfeo*.

In Chapter 3 I contend that a literal interpretation of these two works, and especially of those parts where the narrative of death is involved, contrasts with the Neoplatonic allegorical reading. Specifically, I read the *Stanze*, as an instance of the tragic opposition between glory and love, and the *Orfeo* as a (parodic) celebration of the powerlessness of poetry. In both cases, the idyllic is the setting for a catastrophical event, not a device producing an aesthetics of the picturesque.

Poliziano, Philosophy, and the Question of Human Limitations

³⁰⁹ See Angenot 1983; Segre 1984.

Over the years Poliziano elaborates a pessimistic idea of man. One may speculate on how this could originate in the particular circumstances of his early life and from his melancholic inclinations as attested in some biographical documents I present in Chapter 2. Certainly traditional philosophical and religious metaphysics were of little consolation to him. There is a common consensus among scholars regarding the marginal interest that Poliziano showed towards religion. Yet his attitude towards that form of secular religion that was Ficino's Neoplatonism has been the object of debate. The issue is essential in reconstructing of Poliziano's intellectual biography because, as I argue in Chapter 4, it is his very rejection of Platonism as a lofty philosophical enterprise that will inform his intellectual activity until his death.

My contribution to that debate turns upon a discussion of Poliziano's reading of Plato's writings. In the late 1470s and early 1480s, Poliziano's interest for the "Athenian old man" reaches its apex. Still, the explicit praise of Platonic philosophy as a remedy for the soul in the *Praefatio in Charmidem* (1485) and, a few years earlier, the assimilation of Stoicism into Platonism in the prefatory letter to the translation of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* (1481), are put into question in the second half of the 1480s. By that time, Poliziano had been serving as professor of poetics and rhetorics at the University of Florence for about six years. In that span of time he switched focus exclusively to classical texts, their reconstruction and their history, leaving aside the philosophical speculations that had occupied him some time earlier. Poliziano's reflections on his activity as philologist, as attested in his *adnotationes* and *commentaria*, eventually found their manifesto in 1492 *Lamia*, a university prolation in the form of a fable where

he openly rejects the title of philosopher to embrace that of philologist (“grammaticus”).

But a reading of the *Lamia* next to the *Panepistemon*, an oration on the classification of the arts delivered the year before, leads to a partial reformulation of the apparent refusal of philosophy. In the *Panepistemon* Poliziano subsumes philology – or, more specifically, grammar, history, rhetorics and poetics – under the general category of “rational philosophy”. Therefore, I argue, he is not rejecting philosophy as such in the *Lamia*, but a certain version of it, an idea of philosophy that is incompatible with the limitations of human abilities. This conclusion does not intend to indicate specific skeptical philosophical tenets on the part of Poliziano, but certainly detects a discomfort with traditional tools of philosophy. Finally, affirming that philology is a form of philosophy entails that it is a form of quest for truth. Therefore, I believe that philology, for Poliziano, is the intellectual space for the elaboration of truth, a truth that, in turn, must be sought and obtained with the tentative categories of research for the philologist.

Further Avenues of Research

When I began my research for this study, I was more focused on the idea of loss and more particularly how Poliziano perceived the loss of the artifacts of classical civilizations. Then I observed that this sense of loss was so pervasive that I decided to frame it according to the comprehensive hermeneutics of thanatology. But I also sensed that in coping with loss, Poliziano had developed an intellectual dimension that I had put aside for the present study and that now

I believe should be taken up again. This dimension is his propensity for encyclopedic classification.

Encyclopedism is the totalizing antidote that counters the effects of loss, the heroic Humanistic dream of recomposition, and at the same time the product of an activity doomed to failure. Poliziano tackled this issue in characteristic fashion, proposing the scheme of a novel encyclopedia in the *Panepistemon* but also approaching the world and its phenomena as texts to be incorporated by the comprehensive impetus of the encyclopedist. My next project will explore these issues as the *pars construens* of which thanatology has explored the *pars destruens*.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

I was born on 22 November 1976 in Palermo, Italy. There, in 1995, I earned a diploma from the Liceo Classico “G. Garibaldi,” to eventually attend the Facoltà di Giurisprudenza at the Università degli Studi di Palermo, where I graduated *cum laude* in 2001.

I have indeed both a legal and a literary background. After a M.B.A. on intellectual property management at the Istituto “G. Tagliacarne” in Rome, I decided to devote my study completely to literature and the arts. Thus, I moved to Philadelphia, where I earned my M.A. in Italian at University of Pennsylvania, where I first read some of Poliziano’s works and where I committed myself to the study of the Medieval and Renaissance literature.

In 2005, I joined the Italian program at Johns Hopkins University, and a few years later I was lucky enough to participate to the last round of seminars on the Italian Renaissance held in Villa Spelman in Florence, that year directed by Prof. Christopher S. Celenza.

Over the years, I have presented papers at the R.S.A, at the A.A.I.S. and at the Ne.M.L.A. I published on Boccaccio and Poliziano, edited and translated a study on the relations between ethics and psychoanalysis, and co-edited, with Igor Candido, a volume collecting the proceedings of a conference I organized at Johns Hopkins in 2008 in honor of the Dante scholar John Freccero. I have also written some reviews and curated a booklet on the American photographer Francesca Woodman. The visual art and cinema are indeed other passions of mine. I am an avid bibliophile.

